# Iron In My Spine

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# Iron In My Spine

by willowoftheriver

Summary

Will is forced by her guardian Chilton to marry Hannibal, the leader of a tribe of cannibals, in a bid to raise an army and take back the Iron Throne that rightfully belongs to her. Chilton has his own designs on the Throne, but little does he know that Will already has a mind to outmaneuver him, and living with the cannibals will just embolden her.

Hannibal, meanwhile, is simply amused by it all.

Fill of my own prompt on the Hannibal Kink Meme, wherein I asked for the Game of Thrones Dany/Drogo situation.

Notes

This was my original prompt:

"I really hope this hasn't been requested yet--I did see one GOT AU but not this particular prompt.

So, I want the Dany/Drogo scenario: Young, introverted, virgin Will's jerkass relative/guardian (Jack? Chilton? idk) marries him off to Hannibal, the leader of a tribe of seriously hardcore cannibals as part of a political alliance.

+128947083745 if Will gets pregnant (it can be A/B/O verse or even fem!Will) and has to eat a human heart raw to make the baby strong/prove his worth to the tribe

+my various fresh organs if Hannibal starts manipulating Will out of his shell and together they deliver a painful end to the asshole relative

And if you could throw in a happy ending, I'd love you forever, as I'm a sucker for them."

I've never filled my own prompt before, but I was watching GoT over Christmas and GODDAMN, there I went.

So, I made it fem!Will because, while I adore A/B/O verse, I've never written it before, and Game of Thrones is already so complex without adding even *more* complexity. I seriously

doubt I'd be able to handle it.

Now warnings: my shitty knowledge of the Game of Thrones world, my shitty writing, implied underage (Will's age isn't stated outright, but still), Chilton being a creeper, Hannibal being Hannibal, cannibalism, probable extreme violence at some point in the near future . . .

And I think that's it. So onto fic!

# i sweat my rust

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Recently she's taken to standing on the balcony and looking out across the water, endless waves of pure, smooth blue that go on for as far as her eyes can see. Somewhere, miles and miles away, it laps up on the shores of a land she's never set foot on, and here, it dampens the air, castoff spray joining with the sweat on her brow and running in rivulets down the sides of her face.

She's cold, frozen to the bone, and she can almost imagine the perspiration turning to ice on her skin, searing the sheer fabric of her dress to her flesh. Then it would only come off if it took the skin with it, royal blood gushing out of her veins, and what would come of any of this then?

Of course, given what little she's heard, her *husband* might not even mind.

"Ah, there she is, the bride-to-be!"

Will doesn't turn around at the voice or the approaching footsteps, though she lets herself be led when hands find her arm. In off the balcony, away from the drops of water that might have once been closer to her homeland than she ever has, and then she's being stared at critically by a pair of narrow brown eyes.

"You're a mess," says Frederick, lips pulling back minutely. "Being soaked with sweat will not make an attractive first impression."

She isn't *attractive* under any circumstances. Her House was known for beauty but that hadn't extended to her—mousey and awkward, bordering on scrawny, with hair that grew in every wrong direction. No refined features on her face, no queenly bearing—she's sure that if it wasn't for the madness, everyone would wonder if she wasn't some misbegotten bastard passed off as a Graham. (Sometimes, she wishes they would think that anyway.)

She voices her thoughts: "I'm not pretty. Maybe . . . he won't be interested?" She hates the note of hope she hears creep into her voice. Frederick hears it, too, and his eyes flash, but he twists his lips into what he must think is a reassuring smile.

"You've a woman's body, Will," he says and his hand creeps up, up, up, hovering over her breast. She can feel the heat off his palm but he doesn't touch, not quite, and eventually he moves on to her cheek. His fingers do brush her there. "I don't think your face will matter much to the savage, do you?"

She tries not to flinch at the slight scrape of his fingernails, at the sheer proximity that hits her skin like a burn. This man has raised her from birth, but she hates being touched by him just as much as anyone else, has hated it more and more the older she's gotten.

He chuckles at her, light and dismissive, and finally lets his hand fall away completely. “Grahams,” he says, shaking his head. “So many peculiarities. It’s fascinating. But even if your father was still on the throne instead of that fat usurper, you’d still have to be getting over this . . . *aversion* to touch. You’ve had your first bleed, Will—right now your mother would’ve been giving you the same speech her mother gave her, about how you have to marry to ensure the welfare of your House. But this is even more than that—it’s to ensure your *throne*. Do you want to live in exile for the rest of your life, hunted like a dog? A *beggar queen*, in rags, dependent on the *charity* of those who should be below you?”

Will doesn’t know what she wants, not really. Frederick filled her childhood with stories of that faraway land across the sea that she’s never seen, about a throne of swords and the glory of her House, ground into ruin by a rebellion that should’ve been crushed in its infancy. He’s put visions in her mind’s eye of power, her mad father’s crown ripped from the usurper’s severed head to be placed on hers.

And in a way, Will does want that. She’s never known anything except what she has right now, but the way she thinks, the way she feels, she can almost *know* what she could have, experience it vicariously through imagination.

But Frederick isn’t half as smart as he believes himself to be. Will is mad, like all Grahams invariably are, but while he thinks that makes her stupid, what it really does is let her see into him, if not through him.

He talks about *her throne*, but she can't help but think that what he means is *his*. Every time she looks into his eyes, which isn’t often, she sees the glint of greed, that same burn for power that he’s forced alight somewhere deep in herself.

A part of her doesn’t want to believe it. That the only unchanging thing she’s ever known—the doctor who delivered her, who raised her almost as his own after her mother succumbed to childbed fever—could be so cruel. Could *sell her* and pass it off with pretty lies about how it’s for her own good.

Maybe that’s why she hasn’t out and out said she won’t do it.

Maybe she knows it’ll make no difference anyway and right now, she’d like to hold on to the last thing she has left, as tenuous as it is.

“Start getting yourself ready,” he says, with a nod at the sunken bath in the middle of the rooms. “Let the servants help you, if just today. They’re all very clean, aren’t they?” The last is directed at the other women in the room, who all nod hastily.

She almost laughs, or cries. He never has understood why she hates being touched, that it has nothing to do with cleanliness. It’s the same with her refusal to make eye contact.

For all that he goes on about how interesting her mind is, most of his ideas about it are wrong.

“They’ll be here soon,” he continues, “and I expect you to be completely ready when I call for you.” With one last look, he turns on his heel and starts towards the doorway. She stares

at the back of his head for a long moment, and calls out before she can stop herself.

“Are they really cannibals?” She doesn’t know why she asks, why she wants confirmation of something she hopes is just a rumor. It’ll just upset her more, but on the other hand, the more she knows, the better off she may be. Knowledge is the only power Will has ever had.

Frederick turns slowly. He looks like he’s debating what he’s going to say, and that’s answer enough.

“Lord Crawford tells me they are,” he finally admits. “It’s a part of their . . .” He sneers. “. . . culture. Ritualistically devouring their enemies and the like. They’re a brutal people, but then again, that’s why we want them.”

Her knuckles have gone white around the fabric of her dress. She can hear it begin to tear, as if the sound was coming from somewhere far away.

“I wouldn’t worry,” he says, and there’s that smile again, the complete opposite of reassuring. “You’re a *Graham*. They may all be mad, but . . . so are you.”

She watches him go like her vision’s become a tunnel. Behind her, servants are talking to her or each other, voices a high, annoying buzz in the back of her skull. Her mind is splashing up over itself and all she can feel is the cold, on her skin and around her bones and in her veins.

She turns and steps, staggers, until she registers steam around her head and resistance against her legs, soaked material clinging again to her skin. She stares at the water lapping the edge of the marble and thinks once more of the sea, of a distant shore that blood dictates belongs to her.

“—too hot, milady!” a voice finally breaks through, anxious and concerned.

Is it?

Yet she is still cold.

-

At some point, though she can’t remember when, the servants got the dress off of her. After that, there are flashes, small intervals when something in her recedes and her senses come back for an instant. There’s soap on her skin and suds in her hair and fingers, *hands*, everywhere on her, and then she’s out of the tub and her skin is red from heat at one moment and suddenly back to it’s usual sickly pale the next. She feels a brush catching on tangles and powder on her body, all over, because sweat isn’t attractive, is it?

Perfume behind her ears and files grating against her nails and lotion and makeup and finally another dress pulled over her head and adjusted against her body, just in time for the knock at the door.

She expects another servant, or possibly Frederick, but instead Lady Crawford steps into the room. She's the last person Will would've expected but at the same time, she's not surprised.

Lady Crawford is sick—actually *dying*, Frederick had whispered to her once, eager to gossip behind their hosts' backs. It's some ailment of the lungs, and yet Will has never heard her cough. If not for the devastation plain in every line of Lord Crawford's body, she might not have even believed it was true.

Lady Crawford is still as proud and beautiful today as she was when they first arrived a year ago. She seems unbreakable, and yet Will can imagine what's coming as clearly as if it were happening to her, tissue and fat wasting from the bone and eyes sinking into the skull and lungs agonizing to draw in what little air they can past bloodless lips.

And no amount of pride will stop it from happening, one day.

Lady Crawford looks at her, eyes just as critical as Frederick's, and nods curtly. Her lips move, though Will can't hear a word she says, and she then turns back the way she came. She understands that she should follow her, reluctantly moving to trail a few paces behind.

She leads her through the winding, grandiose hallways of the building, past lavishly decorated rooms that Frederick had privately scoffed at, deemed lacking.

Will's senses begin to come back slowly, one at a time. First she realizes she smells overpoweringly of fruit and flowers, sickly sweet and nauseating. Then it gets worse when she notices the way it seems to cling to the stickiness of her skin, the powder and lotion and makeup feeling like a thick layer of grime sitting heavy on top of her. She felt cleaner before the bath.

Finally, Lady Crawford's words begin to penetrate and register.

"—isn't as uncivilized as you would assume. He was rather eloquent, in fact."

She almost laughs at that, loud and hysterical. The vegetarian noblewoman calling the cannibal warlord *eloquent*.

"When did you meet him?" she asks instead, the words hoarse, drawn out with effort from between lips that barely move.

She hesitates. "Among his people, he is . . . a healer, of some renown. It's not *our* medicine, but it's supposedly effective."

"And did he help you?"

"No," she says briskly. "Nothing can help me. But I can help you. Take this advice to heart: do not offend him. He doesn't take insult lightly. Be *polite*."

That does, finally, startle a laugh out of her. The sound is just as ugly as she'd feared.

"A *cannibal* who values *politeness*?"

Lady Crawford stops by a set of double doors and shoots her a glance over her shoulder. “Maester Chilton oversimplifies things. Savage doesn’t mean uncomplicated.”

The doors open out onto the front of the house. Frederick and Lord Crawford are already there, the former shifting anxiously as they look out over the path that winds its way through the property’s acreage.

Frederick spares her a glance but doesn’t comment—evidently, he finds what the servants did satisfactory.

They descend into an awkward, drawn out silence. It only breaks when he all but hisses at Crawford: “It’s getting close. There’s no sign of them.”

“They’ll be here,” says Crawford, self-assured as usual. “I’ve never known them to be late.”

Frederick sniffs. Will fidgets.

And then comes the sound, muffled by distance: horse hooves beating against the ground.

As they get louder, Will thinks they sound like the executioner’s ax meeting the flesh and bone of the neck, over and over and over. Or maybe, maybe they’re more like *war drums*—a rhythm to break the peace, a rhythm to spill blood on foreign land.

They finally appear in a cloud of gray-brown dust, three of them emerging from the copse of trees at the far end of the path. They seem so far away and yet they’re through the gates almost before she can blink or breathe, pulling their horses to a stop. The animals shift their feet and flick their tails, huge black eyes unblinking between the straps of their bridles.

Crawford rushes forward to say something, voice booming across the yard, and Frederick takes the opportunity to grab her wrist and pull her to his side.

“He doesn’t speak the Common Tongue,” he whispers, eyes fixated on the man in the middle of the group, on the black horse. Will’s eyes pass over all of them, but she doesn’t really see, doesn’t really *look*. “So don’t waste your breath. But *smile*.”

“What?”

“Smile at him and *meet his eyes*.”

His grip tightens to bruising before he lets go. Then he steps back and she’s left frozen and exposed, like a deer in the sights of a crossbow.

Crawford is talking to everyone now, she thinks, given the movement of his eyes and his body language, but she’s only catching bits and pieces.

“—this is Willow of the House of Graham, the first of her name and the rightful Queen of the Seven Kingdoms across the Sea—”

Finally, she takes a step, then another. Again and again until she’s standing close enough for the black horse to lean down and put its nose on the top of her head.

"—Hannibal," says Jack with finality.

*Hannibal*, thinks Will.

Her gaze travels up, up, over boots and legs and clothing that's finer than she would have expected. When she reaches the shoulders she pulls her lips back into what she hopes is a passable smile and then, finally, she's looking at a face.

Under different circumstances, she might've called it handsome. It certainly doesn't look like a savage's, or a cannibal's. Her gaze flits around, taking in each individual feature without ever quite meeting the eyes.

She can almost hear Frederick's teeth grinding in the background but what he still doesn't understand after all this time is that it's nothing about shyness or even madness—it's about looking and seeing too much, or sometimes, more frighteningly, *not enough*.

She wonders, in the instant before she shifts her eyes down from his forehead, which she'll find in Hannibal's.

His eyes are brown, but an odd shade, running almost . . . reddish at certain points. There are no veins visible in the whites and the pupils are narrow in the sunlight. They're focused singularly and intensely on her and she . . . can't direct any of that scrutiny back at him. It's like he's in a blind spot—she can't see him or feel him, *become* him just by looking and imagining. As he is right now, she can't tell a thing about him.

This has never happened before. Maybe she should be happy about it, but instead she feels almost . . . challenged. She *should* be able to read this man, and yet there he sits right in front of her, inscrutable and blank, slipping easily through her fingers.

So she grasps at him in a new way. There is one thing she already knows about him, so she takes the word *cannibal* and runs it over and over through her mind, distilling it into something real and applying it to him. She thinks about him killing, about human blood running over his hands and *down his chin*, about his teeth tearing into human flesh, grinding it into bits his throat works to swallow. She can't know what it tastes like so she thinks of the blood itself, hot and thick and tangy with iron, sliding down her throat and warming her belly.

And finally, *finally*, the feelings begin to come, vague and misshapen. She gets the impression of being malformed, ingrown, shrieking and base and twisted, an abomination that someone should've left to die. But it doesn't die. Instead, it festers.

She's not smiling anymore. Her throat's gone dry and tight, trapping the bile inching its way up from her stomach. She's locked in place, pinned by her own perception. She feels the insanity like a wave, rushing over and dragging her under.

Hannibal tilts his head, slowly, thoughtfully. Then his lips twitch and he's kicking the black horse in the sides, pulling the reins and leading his companions off the way they came.

"What was *that*?" Frederick's voice rings out, nearly shrill. "He didn't—did he *like* her?"

Crawford laughs heartily. “Oh, if he didn’t like her, I think we’d know.”

Her stomach clenches, churns. She’s sweating again, past all the powder and perfume, and her limbs feel weak beneath her prickling skin. It’s like she has a fever, her delirium rattling with the hollow cries of that *thing* that’s taken up residence deep in her psyche.

She doesn’t know how long she stands there. At some point Lady Crawford’s presence begins to slowly filter in, hovering behind her but not touching, not crowding. Further behind, Frederick and Crawford are talking, eagerly discussing the future, plans for conquest with *her new army*, the savages she’s about to marry herself to.

And she can’t take it.

“I don’t like him,” she hisses, low but still loud enough to be heard.

The conversation stops immediately and the silence is icy; she can feel Frederick’s eyes on her back.

“What?” he demands.

“He might like me,” she bites out, swinging around, “but *I* don’t like *him*. I don’t want to marry him.”

“‘You don’t want . . .’” he echoes, stalking forward. “‘You don’t *want*’? This isn’t about what you *want*. This is about *more* than you. This is about your family, your House, its honor, its *throne*!”

“And I can bring *so much* honor to my House by becoming some, some cannibal’s whore?”

“The road to any throne is long, and dangerous, and brimming with little *indignities* to be suffered.” He’s up on her now, breath just reaching her face. “And if you were *any* kind of Queen, you would suffer them, and suffer them *gladly*. If that savage demanded that you let all of his men, all forty thousand, and their women, and their horses, and their dogs, fuck you, you should not only agree but *smile* as you do so.”

She flinches away as he reaches up, his fingers brushing the hair out of her eyes. “But you have a lesser indignity to suffer, Will. After all, you were born to be a queen. And so you shall be.”

He leans in, presses a feather light kiss to her brow.

“Queen of the savages.”

-

That night, Will stands on her balcony, stares at the black rolling water of the sea.

Thinks about jumping into it.

Thoughts of a throne of iron swords keep her feet planted on the floor, her hands clenched around the balustrade. The season’s first snow appears in flurries, invisible in the dark until they come to cling on her hair and skin.

She doesn’t notice.

She doesn’t know what time it is when she finally turns and goes to her bed, or even what makes her do so. She slides under a blanket stiffened by the cold and stares at the ceiling as warmth slowly accumulates around her.

She doesn’t expect to sleep that night, but the air is so *frigid* it magnifies the effect of the warmth, lulling her off and off until the dark of the room turns into the dark of her mind. It’s something much blacker, much deeper.

She dreams of a stag, huge and horrible and covered in a raven’s feathers.

Chapter End Notes

Who might the fat usurper be? Robert Baratheon? Abel Gideon? FRANKLYN FROIDEVEAUX?

. . . I don't know. Actually, I don't even really know how much of a fusion this is going to be. Like, beyond the Iron Throne and the Seven Kingdoms, should I use more actual parts of Game of Thrones? Is Will's homeland Westeros or the continent of Wolftrap? I don't even know.

(Though, you know, I could actually really imagine Freddie as Abel's queen but cheating on him with somebody. But she doesn't have a brother . . . Hmm.)

The story title comes from the song 'Ironspy' by Splashdown.

The chapter title comes from 'Radioactive' by Imagine Dragons.

# i'm in love with being queen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She wakes from a slap across her face.

For a moment her head stays as it is, parallel to her shoulder, and she blinks slowly, deliberately, as she tries to orient herself, answer *who-where-what-why*.

She's staring at stones set into the ground, gray granite covered in a weak dusting of snow. Her feet are wet and colder than the rest of her, even her face as the wind beats against it in harsh gusts. She tastes blood in her mouth, gushing down over the molar that made the knick.

Her cheek on that side stings, but realer than that is where her skin *prickles*, hairs raised from hot exhalations of breath and a soft velvet nose dragging against her neck and over her shoulder. The presence is gone now, though—no heat behind her, no clop of hooves, no flashes of twisting shadows in the shape of antlers.

Now there's just what's in front of her.

"Going somewhere?" asks Frederick, voice tight with anger.

Finally her head turns back. Her eyes skim over him, standing there in his nightclothes with his lips pursed into a thin line and his nose flaring, and move past his head to take in the surroundings. It looks like they're in some back courtyard of the estate she doesn't recognize, a few servants peering down curiously out of the surrounding windows.

She's not surprised. Whenever this has happened before, she's never woken up anywhere she's familiar with.

"I was dreaming," she mutters, reluctantly dragging her gaze back to him.

He narrows his eyes. She knows what he must be doing—recalling all the other times and comparing them to this to determine if it's a genuine episode or an escape attempt made to look like one.

The sleepwalking first started when she was eight years old, a few sporadic incidents that stopped entirely for years, only to return more frequently than ever in the year preceding menarche.

At the height of it, she'd traveled *miles*, her feet bleeding and nearly frozen before she ever woke up. Locking her in her room doesn't help—even barricading only slows her down.

Frederick told her that at the madhouse he ran in her homeland, they'd had special jackets with straps that pinned the arms to the chest and made doing nearly anything impossible for the *difficult* patients that wore them. But he doesn't have one of those now, so she gets bound in layers of blankets or, in the worst parts of it, tied to the bed frame.

Frederick looks ready to do that again, though at least as he takes in her lack of shoes and appropriate clothing, his anger seems to fade with his suspicions.

“It’s an ungodly hour,” he finally says, glancing around and squinting in the gray predawn light. “Only servants should be up so early. Certainly not you. We should get you back to your bed before you catch pneumonia and you should try to get a few more hours of sleep. I don’t need to tell you that today you should be looking your . . . freshest.”

He brushes past her and starts off across the courtyard, his pace brisk, almost eager.

She inhales slowly, deeply. The cold air bites her lungs and brings a little clarity to her head, pushing her further into wakefulness. She feels the first stirrings of adrenaline as she’s seized with the impulse to just *run*, to turn and take this last chance and *go*. She can feel the muscles of her legs twitch, prepared.

But she lets her breath out in a shaky white exhale and follows him instead.

-

She doesn’t go back to sleep, not that she tries. When she’s upset, it’s not a reprieve for her like it is for most—instead her troubles follow her there, become bloated and even more horrible now that they have no barriers except the bone of her skull.

She lays on her side under her blanket, stiff with tension, hating every moment that goes by, watching with dread as the thin, milky light of dawn creeps into the room. She listens closely over the sound of her own shaky breathing, the slightest hint of noise making it hitch—because it could be the servants, it could be *time*.

When the knock finally does come, she tastes bile, sour and watery in the back of her throat. Waiting was purgatory but she would’ve stayed there forever if it meant this moment never came.

The knocks have become politely insistent by the time she staggers to the door. She slips it open enough to make them realize they have permission to come in but doesn’t bother to greet them. She doesn’t even look at them—just drags herself across into the adjoining bathroom and assumes they’ll follow.

She collapses in the chair at the vanity and doesn’t bother to protest when one of the maidservants begins brushing her hair. The others start scurrying around behind them, preparing the bath and gathering all the same vile cosmetic things they put on her yesterday.

The only mercy she can find in any of it is that they all have the grace not to be cheery. She’s sure they know some details of the situation and so, accordingly, they’re somber enough to seem like they’re preparing her for a funeral instead of a wedding. (And she wouldn’t have it any other way.)

When the brush stops hitting tangles, she slips off her nightgown and steps down into the bath, sliding her back against hot marble. She fidgets until she’s comfortable and lets her

head fall back onto the edge of the tub, inhaling the steam. It's a nice change from the air outside, even if it reeks of the oils and salts the servants piled into the water.

The creak of the bathroom's hall door opening makes her head snap up again.

"The preparations are coming along well outside. I wanted to make sure they also were in here," says Frederick, turning to her with that same critical gaze he'd had yesterday. She wishes there were more bubbles in the water.

"Do something about the rings under her eyes," he says, grimacing, to one of the servants. Then to her: "Didn't you go back to sleep like I told you?"

"It's a miracle I slept at all."

"And most of that you spent walking around. Couldn't be very restful, especially for a day like today. I am looking forward to the party, even though I wouldn't suggest either of us do much eating."

"I'll drink, then."

He looks at her sharply. "Water, I hope you mean."

"Maybe some of that, too."

"You can't be *drunk* by the time you have to leave."

"Why not?"

"It's important that you keep him happy! That you *please* him tonight! Which you won't, if you're stumbling around like a drunken fool!"

She can't believe what they're discussing, that somehow the conversation spiraled out of control so quickly and now she's about to say this: "What difference will it make when I'm —" She hesitates, humiliated, and glances around at the servants who are all trying to act like they're not listening. "—laying down?"

"Is that all you intend to do?" he demands, with a little mocking laugh. "Lay there? Like a dead fish?"

"He was promised a virgin, wasn't he? I doubt he'll be expecting much more."

He opens his mouth, clearly not satisfied, but she cuts him off. "I don't want to talk about this with you!"

He starts circling the tub with slow, measured steps. She looks down at her legs, tries to make a point of not watching him.

"Yes," he finally says. "It is unfortunate, for both of us, that I'm the only one you have to discuss this with. In a perfect world, it would've been up to your parents to talk to you about your wedding night. I'm sure your mother would've done much better than I explaining what

your husband might want, considering your father was far crueler to her than even that savage could *ever* be to you. Or maybe your father would've claimed First Night and showed you himself—Grahams always have been so fond of incest—"

"Get out," Will snarls, head swiveling towards him.

He looks taken aback. "What?"

Her eyes roll up in her sockets to glare at straight at him, holding his gaze as steadily as she's able. "Get. *Out*," she repeats through gritted teeth, her hand coming up to clench the lip of the tub.

He looks like he doesn't even know what expression to make, much less how to respond. She's never talked to him like this before, but then again, he's never talked to her quite like *that* until recently.

Their relationship has never been warm. He's always dealt with her using a kind of clinical detachment, like because he'd once been the Royal Physician, that automatically makes her his patient above anything else.

He'd been retained by the Grahams primarily because of his knowledge of madness, of *mental illness*—the numerous, horrible, creative ways the mind could malfunction, many of which presented themselves in her family sooner or later.

His scrutiny of her mind has always been uncomfortable, but he had never been truly *vicious* to her, especially not when she was a little girl. But as the years passed, he seemed to get more and more *impatient*—of this exile, of her, of everything—and it was only recently that she's realized he's been waiting for an opportunity to present itself. Everything depends on an army, whether it be her ambitions, as half formed as they are, or his own, which she suspects have been burning for more than a decade.

It hurts more than it should, the rapidly crystallizing understanding that to him, she's just a pawn. Raised with ulterior motives, disposable and inhuman enough to let an entire army rape for the chance at a throne.

"I'm your *guardian*," he finally says, outraged. "You can't *order*—"

"If you won't go, I'll—I'll call someone to *make* you."

"Oh? And who do you think will take orders from a *child*?"

And isn't that something, to be called a child on her wedding day. It feels like laughing with blood in her mouth, a hemorrhage sprung in her chest.

"Someone will from a queen."

He shakes his head, glares at her in resentful, almost pitying condescension. "You're not queen of *anything*."

And she just barely smiles, a small, bitter twitch of her lips. "Yet."

His head jerks back, eyes widening. Her threat is veiled, abstract even to herself, but there it is, hanging in the humid air of the room. In a few hours she'll be a queen, and even if it's just in name, it'll be *something*. She won't be nothing anymore.

She'll be more than he is.

She wonders if he ever thought about that before.

He seems to shake the shock off all at once. Face turned hateful, he comes up on her quickly, hands slamming down on either side of the tub. She jerks away, looking back down into the water, neck tense where his breath hits it.

"I got you to here," he whispers furiously. "I *arranged* this for you."

As if she will ever forget *that*.

"You—if not for me, you would be *dead*. You would've died along with your mother. And this is how you repay me? Ungratefulness, a refusal to cooperate every time I try to guide you, to do what's best for you. You're a stupid little girl who doesn't know the first thing about politics. You have no grasp of what it will take to get the Iron Throne, of what kind of game we're playing. You either win or you die, Will, and if not for me, how long do you really think you would last?"

She can hear him swallow, feel the brush of his hair against hers. He breathes in and out, one—two—three times, and then finally, he pulls away.

She doesn't look up at the noise of his footsteps drawing away, as relieving as they are. Nor does she when they stop.

"Maybe you belong with the savages—maybe it's all you're fit for," he says, and the door closes harsh and resounding behind him.

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She stands and stares through the balcony doors as they put the dress on her, something gauzy and flowing and white—the virgin's color. Then they pull portions of her hair into braids and pin them up around her head, wipe the dampness off her face and put the powders and makeup on, taking extra care to apply a cream under her eyes. The perfume is after that, and the jewelry last, a scant few pieces she's sure were borrowed or donated by Lady Crawford.

The Lady herself arrives just as the last touches are being applied, knocking and waiting until one of the servants opens the door. She steps in, hands clasped behind her back, looking even more polished than usual. Will might be the bride—something Lady Crawford has acknowledged by her choice in dress color, black instead of her usual white or cream—but she feels small in comparison, homely and underwhelming.

"It's almost time," says Lady Crawford, with just a breath of apprehension. "The preparations are done and the . . . guests have arrived."

Will shuts her eyes and breathes deep against the rush of nausea. In front of her, the balcony and the water stretch out in invitation, beckoning, and every muscle twitches with the desire for the jump.

"But before we go," the other woman continues after a pause, voice drawing closer, "I thought I might give you my gift."

"I thought those came after . . ." *After the ceremony*. She can't even say it.

"Jack has something to be given for both of us then. This is just from me, and it's better given before."

Finally she opens her eyes and turns back to the woman, who smiles slightly as she pulls her hands around to the front. Will blinks blankly at what she's holding.

"In our homeland, these are only given by the winner of a tourney to his wife or a woman he wants to court." Her smile widens for an instant into something wistful and distant. "Jack gave one to me before we were married. And if your father were still King, I've no doubt you would've been receiving them from suitors at every tourney for several years running. So I feel you're overdue to become the Queen of Love and Beauty."

Lady Crawford lifts the wreath of white roses and positions them carefully on her head, twining a few hairs into the stems to anchor it in place.

Will makes an aborted motion to touch it, bemused. *Love and beauty*? What does she know about either of those things?

Nevertheless, she forces herself to be gracious.

"Thank you. You've been . . . very kind to me," she says, nearly stumbling over the words. "When I'm—when I'm Queen, I won't forget."

"But you won't be a queen," says Lady Crawford, and Will thinks she detects something . . . teasing in her voice now, a tone she's never heard from her before. "At least, not in the language of what's shortly to be your people."

Is that even what she's referring to? Now, or earlier with Frederick? Whenever she says the word queen, does she mean what she's about to become or something else, something more —*the* Queen, a Queen of Kings, of Seven Kingdoms, of *everyone* and *everything*?

Though how can she make promises on that now when Lady Crawford may not live long enough to see it happen, if it ever does?

"What will I be?" Will asks, and it strikes her that this is the first word she's going to hear in this language—is the only word Hannibal speaks that she's going to *know*.

It rolls off Lady Crawford's tongue smoothly, three flowing syllables: "*Khaleesi."*

Will drags it over and over though her head, bounces it off the barriers of her skull, and all she can think is that it sounds prettier than it has any right to be, when it's something she so

dreads becoming.

Lady Crawford frowns at her, eyes softening. Her hands make a little half movement at her sides but still almost immediately, like she thought to touch her but realized quickly it wouldn't help.

"You look a lot like your mother on her wedding day," she says after a pause. The words sound more regretful than anything, certainly not a compliment.

"You were there?" she asks in surprise.

"Of course. My father was a strong ally of the Grahams." She laughs suddenly, but the tone makes it clear to Will that she's very, very unamused by what she's about to say. "He wanted *me* to marry your father, but your grandfather wouldn't consider it. Grahams only married Grahams, to keep the blood pure. But none of your father's sisters or aunts were still living, so the closest they could get was a first cousin, your mother."

The reality that there are no other Grahams for her to marry—that she's the last, the only—presses down on her like something physical anytime she thinks about it too deeply. That the sum of her House exists only in her, and that the only way for it to continue, to survive, to multiply, is for her to birth it . . .

"I didn't know her personally," she continues. "But I was well enough acquainted with your father to pity her. I remember being very glad that I wasn't in her place, even seeing how lavish the wedding was. And she was beautiful that day, though . . . unsmiling. Resolved rather than happy. She always seemed that way, even after she was Queen."

"How could anyone be like that for so long?"

Lady Crawford inhales slowly, thinking, remembering. "I always got the impression that she put herself above everything—above *him*. High up on a branch so far away he could never reach it."

Will thinks—*knows*, instantly and with all certainty—that if she had known her mother, she would've envied her that more than anything. Admired it, and resented it.

Distance is the one thing Will can never have. Even if she approximates it from someone else, the very nature of it means that she's still too close.

"I think we've gotten sidetracked," says Lady Crawford, with a glance out the window over Will's shoulder. "The Khal appreciates punctuality."

She puts a little twist on the word *appreciates*, barely noticeable but apparent enough to Will that she hears it instead as *demands* and feels the looming shadow of consequences should the demand not be met. (*Because he doesn't take insult lightly, don't waste his time—)*

Lady Crawford offers out her arm and she wants to shudder, to shake until she falls apart and can't be put back together. She wants to cry, too, to just let sobs come and come until she can't breathe or think and she's so red and wet and ugly that nobody could possibly want her.

But she bites all of that back—pushes it down past the lump in her throat to sit heavy in her chest, not gone but at least hidden.

And her arm barely trembles when she slides it around the other woman's, their elbows linking.

(She'll never understand distance, but she thinks that maybe she's beginning to understand resolve.)

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Compared to the reception, the wedding ceremony itself is very brief.

Hannibal is already waiting for her, along with a scant few witnesses and the tribesman who appears to be acting as officiator. Frederick rushes to grab her arm and pull her away from Lady Crawford, his fingers even tighter than yesterday as he walks her towards the Khal.

He hands her off to him with a wide simpering smile.

After that, it becomes an exercise in not looking at him directly. She repeats fast spoken foreign words with the best pronunciation she can muster and keeps her eyes over his shoulder, on the ground, on her hands.

But it's not that easy. While looking and noticing movements and ticks and breathing might make it worse, she doesn't have to see a person to feel them. Sometimes they don't even have to be anywhere near her—she can just look at something they've made or done and suddenly it's like a pendulum in her mind, revealing more pieces of them with each swing.

Once, one of their hosts had been a wealthy old woman, religious and superstitious. She told her she'd been touched by the gods, given a third eye deep in her mind. It was a gift, she insisted—it showed favor.

Will doesn't feel favored. A few times, she's thought she might be willing to gouge her eyes out if it would just make it stop.

The impression she got from Hannibal makes her feel that way, incomplete as it is. It's carved out a place for itself in her head and all she wants to do is lock it away, to kill it in its infancy so she never has to feel it take full form, so she never has to understand.

She only meets his eyes briefly—accidently—when the ceremony draws to a close and he leans down to kiss her. She doesn't see anything more than a kind of vague amusement before his lips are pressing into hers, dry and closed.

It's a peck, really, over in an instant. The audience claps reservedly—Frederick is still the only one smiling; Lady Crawford has her lips pursed, just barely not frowning. They have a more enthusiastic reaction when Hannibal says something—though she can't understand it, she's guessing it was along the lines of him asking if they were ready to start the after party.

Preparations have been made nearby, along the cliff side overlooking the sea. In contrast to the wedding, it seems like a good chunk of Hannibal's forty thousand men were invited to

this, along with a nearly equal number of women. They crowd into a sunken area amongst a number of long, high tables, whereas Hannibal and Will sit on mats a few steps above them at their own low table. (Her guests, all three of them, also get a private table, though they're so far to her left she couldn't talk to them if she wanted to.)

Each table is laden heavily with food. *Beautiful* food, crafted and arranged artfully, with vibrant colors and elaborate garnishes and sauces drizzled on and around it like paint. It's a veritable feast, the likes she's never seen before even at the wealthiest of hosts' homes.

And the *scent* of it is just as heavenly as its appearance, no two aromas clashing.

It makes the saliva well up in her mouth just as much as it does the bile in her stomach.

Hannibal fixes his plate, and then hers, as the musicians start their first piece. His people take that as their cue to begin the party in earnest, dancing and laughing and, of course, eating.

She stares at the contents of her plate. The sauce is dripped and drizzled precisely around a few vegetables, which only seem to be there to accent the focal point—the meat. Three little flesh toned, seasoned medallions.

She reaches across and grabs her wineglass by the stem, sipping at it as she watches Hannibal eat from the corner of her eye. After awhile, she shifts her gaze to the other side, trying to catch a glimpse of what Lady Crawford is eating, if anything.

Eventually, she spears half of a small potato on her fork and nibbles at it, trying to calm her stomach. She enjoys alcohol—always has, ever since she got used to the taste—and no matter what Frederick might think, she can hold it fairly well. But it doesn't soothe an upset stomach.

Unfortunately, her action draws a sideways glance from Hannibal. He says—or asks—something that sounds . . . disappointed. Or disapproving.

"What's the meat?" she decides to ask, even though she fears the answer. She gestures down at it, tries to make a motion to get across *what*.

Hannibal glances at it and raises a hand up to his chest. He taps his pointer finger off to the side, over a pectoral muscle, and takes a pointed breath.

*Lung*.

Will swallows convulsively. Darts her tongue out over her lips. Turns back to the plate.

She drops the fork, half eaten potato on it, and picks the glass back up. It's drained in two gulps and she turns to a servant to ask for more.

She's halfway through the second glass when the gifts begin to be presented. The first to approach them is a woman with fine blonde hair, beautiful and pale and dispassionate. She trades a few words with Hannibal and leaves them with a bottle of rosé wine.

After her come many more, each as varied as the gifts—a thin, dark skinned man brings a beautiful wooden instrument she has no idea how to play, whereas the heavyset white man that hovers behind him gives them blocks of various cheeses. A man with receding hair brings deer pelts, an older brunette woman gives her a dress, and Jack Crawford presents to her a bracelet, gold and spiraling for her lower arm.

“It once belonged to a very brave, intelligent girl,” he says. “I see a lot of her in you, so I believe there wouldn’t be anyone better to have it.”

She almost asks what happened to her, before realizing how obvious that is. *She died*.

So she just thanks him and puts it on, idly running her thumb over the metal as the next gift is presented, wondering who she was.

She’s started to lose track of how many they’ve received when a woman approaches, her gait easy and confident.

“Something for the new Khaleesi,” she says to Hannibal with a smile, gesturing down with her chin at the bundle of cloth in her arms. Will narrows her eyes when she thinks she sees it shift.

The woman ascends the few low, wide steps and lowers herself to her knees across from Will, turning the smile onto her. “My Lady. I am aware that the favored animal of your noble House—” she says, and this time, the bundle *definitely* moves, “—and that of your banner, is the dog. So I thought you might like—”

She draws back an edge of the material and out pops a head, the black nose twitching with the smells in the air. Then a leg wiggles free and the rest of the material is unwrapped, falling to the ground, leaving her staring at a brown-gold puppy.

Will’s breath hitches, mouth going dry, and the instant rush of happiness is so great it almost overpowers the anxiety and the dread that’s dominated her for more than a week. She reaches out with no conscious input, grasping eagerly, fingers sinking into short, soft fur.

The woman releases the puppy to her and she pulls it onto her lap, its front paws on her chest. It (but then she glances down, and suddenly it’s a he) sniffs her face, nose sweeping in damp arcs over her chin and cheeks and lips. Then he starts to kiss her, licking a path up until his paws are on her shoulders—and that’s when he latches onto her earlobe, sucking eagerly.

She jumps, actually *laughing*, and it’s the first time in recent memory that it hasn’t sounded like the death keen of some animal.

“He misses his mother,” says the woman, tilting her head fondly. “But he’s weaned, no matter how much he’d like more milk.”

“What is his name?” she asks, content to let him stay there for as long as he’d like. However, he seems to realize he won’t be getting anything and slides back down to investigate her lap.

“That’s for my Lady to decide.”

Will blinks, surprised that nothing immediately jumps to mind.

Maybe her family does have some special affinity for dogs, as she herself has always adored them above any other animal. Frederick sometimes told her of her grandfather's hounds, her father's retrievers, even her mother's pack of tiny lapdogs, but he would never let her have one of her own. They had no money to feed a dog, he said, living off of charity as they were—and were they supposed to just bring an animal into their hosts' homes, expect them to shelter it, too?

So Will took what she could, befriending her hosts' dogs and strays on the street, however briefly it lasted. She much preferred their company to any human's—they were joyful and nonjudgmental, intelligent without doing any harm with it. They comforted her, each of them a soothing presence that eliminated loneliness without actually having to *interact*.

Yet, maybe she really had been convinced she'd never have one of her own, considering she's never even touched on names until this moment.

"What's *your* name?" she asks, if only to break the anticipatory silence.

"Alana. Of the House of Bloom."

"You know about my House. And you call your family a House as well. Does that mean you're . . . from my homeland?"

She nods. "My family stewarded a small island along the western coast."

The puppy's head finds its way onto the table, and his tongue flicks out towards the meat on her plate. She pulls him back just in time.

"Then how did you end up here?" *Did your family support mine*? she almost continues bitterly.

But Alana doesn't seem overly upset by what she says, her expression barely changing: "My father died when I was about your age. As he didn't have any sons or living male relatives, who was to inherit his title was immediately up for debate. I knew that it was likely I would've been . . . pressured into marrying the successor to strengthen his position, so I fled. Eventually I found my way across the sea, and for the past several years, I've been learning healing and medicine from the Khal." She lowers her head a fraction in deference to Hannibal.

Will frowns. "Why didn't *you* inherit his title?"

Alana frowns in return, confused, glancing questioningly from her to Hannibal and back again. "Women don't. They never have. The only titles they can have come from marriage, or relation to their father."

Will grips the puppy a little tighter, lips a severe line. This isn't—it's not anything Frederick has ever told her. She's always thought—he's always *implied*—that since she is her father's only child, there's no question about her inheriting his title. She is the Queen because he'd

been the King, and if she could just take back the throne, she would have as much power as he'd had, an equal, autonomous monarch.

But if a daughter doesn't inherit her father's titles, even if she is his only child, what does that ultimately mean for her?

She darts her eyes over to Frederick, glaring as she watches him drink and talk with Lord Crawford. She also wonders what this means for *him*, what he's playing at—what *else* he's withholding from her.

A burst of loud, angry screaming, and the gradual lessening of noise from the crowd, draws her back to what's in front of her. Alana's half-turned, staring with concern at the scene—a young redheaded man spitting words at a wide eyed, wind chaffed girl, who takes them in silence.

Next to her is another girl, slightly taller and fuller but with such similar features she might be a sister. She *does* respond, yelling and stooping swiftly down to pick up a rock that she throws against his forehead.

He spares her a short, poisonous glance, hand moving automatically to the wound, but his next shouts are still aimed at the first girl.

"What's going on?" Will demands, looking sharply to Alana.

She twists her legs underneath her, positioning herself sideways between the table and the crowd. "He's accusing her of murdering his sister."

"Right *now*? In the middle of—*this*?"

"Parties nearly always double as times to resolve disputes. The Khal is present to preside and . . ." She hesitates, glancing at her from the corner of her eye. ". . . if no one dies, they might run out of food."

All at once, the taller girl is grabbed by a middle-aged woman, who hisses in her ear as she pulls her away, and the man produces a knife, knuckles white around the hilt. The remaining girl eyes it warily, only just looking up in time to catch a blade thrown her way by a man with receding hair, the same one who gave them deer pelts.

"This is a fight to the death?" She's dumbstruck, horrified—because she's only just reached marriageable age and yet that girl out there is even *younger* than she is, a *child,* and though Will's just realized she's ignorant about any number of things, she *does* know that women don't fight. It's inconceivable to her that this man would even pick a fight with one, and beyond that, that *no one is stepping in to stop it*.

"Vengeance has a lot of cultural significance," says Alana, like that explains anything. "Fights like these are standard for any number of grievances."

"But she's so *young*—and why isn't her father or, or a brother trying to take her place?"

“That’s not the way it works. Revenge by proxy would never be considered acceptable. Here, everyone is culpable for their own actions, no matter their age or gender.”

She sounds like she accepts it—but maybe it’s more that she’s gotten *used* to it, because Will sees her frown when she turns back to the combatants, the line of her jaw tense.

The other partygoers have formed a circle around them, jeering and screaming, goading them on. Man and girl sidestep, sizing each other up, both poised to strike, though where he’s steady, focused in his rage, she’s pale and afraid and taking short jerking breaths.

He lunges first and she just barely dodges under, spinning to stay facing him but backing away as far as the crowd will allow.

She says something, head shaking—*I didn’t do it*, Will imagines—but the last word is cutoff when she skitters away from the next slash.

It continues like that for a while, painful to watch. She’s like a scared little rabbit, relying fully on speed to survive the fox, but even that fails her when she finally moves in to attempt a blow. The tip of her knife grazes him but he brings his own blade up in time to catch her in the arm, a hard, cutting hit that makes her shriek.

She manages to stagger back as the blade is aimed at her throat, though Will thinks she must’ve felt the air move against her jugular. She hesitates, heaving, blood welling up and dripping down between her fingers clenched over the wound, eyes jumping between him and the knife by his feet where she dropped it.

He glances at it, too, and then steps over it, his mouth a grim line as he closes the scant distance between them. She stands there, frozen, and her eyes are so big and the knife is coming up and Will doesn’t even think she can keep looking—

But then—then she’s moving. She’s dodging. The knife catches her on the side of her good arm but instead of flinching she kicks him low and hard on the shin and hits her shoulder into his as she passes him, knocking him off balance.

She bends and picks up her knife in one fluid motion, feet already preparing for the turn, and then she’s back over to him just as he’s spun around, his weight focused all on one side.

And she slams the knife into his stomach, blade sinking into the hilt.

For just an instant, they both seem shocked. They don’t even bother to look at it, holding each other’s eyes as the blood starts to seep down in rivulets between them.

His weapon hits the ground with a dull thump and he looks like he’s going to fall, like the blade sucked out all the rigidity from his limbs. But then something changes on her face—the rabbit grows fangs, baring its teeth and narrowing its eyes, and with a grunt of effort, she rips the knife up through skin and tissue all the way to his breastbone.

The blood comes pouring out in its wake, thickened with meat and guts and off-white viscera that plop hideously to the ground.

And finally—*finally* she pulls the knife out and he falls, dead before he lands.

The crowd is a writhing mess, a pack of howling wolves that she ignores in favor of Hannibal. She turns to him and raises her knife, deliberately, carefully, and with one long, pale finger she scoops up blood and tissue from the blade, bringing it to her mouth.

Will feels sick dampness gather on her brow as she watches the girl's neck work, sees the trail of red left on her lower lip as she pulls her saliva-slick finger back out. The wine is beginning to take effect in earnest, but instead of dimming her like it usually does, it *sharpens* her, dulling everything in the peripheral so as to make what's right in front of her clearer.

And it is clear, taking form and weight in her mind, and she *knows*—horror-terror-hate-adrenaline, *stay way from me stay away from me*, rushing white noise in the ears and euphoria in the chest as the knife goes up-up-up through resistance, blood over the tongue and against the membranes of the throat, gristle and fat sliding heavy into the stomach—

She digs her nails into her arm to make it end, to bring her back to herself. *Yes, this is her body, here she is, here not there, this is her.*

Next to her, Hannibal finally gives the girl a little half nod, deliberate and considering. It seems to relax her, and the other girl reappears to grab her excitedly as the chaos increases, the crowd tearing at the corpse, dragging it off.

*To the fire pit*, thinks Will. *Dessert for my wedding guests.*

She chases the sour alcohol bile in top of her throat back down with another gulp of wine, shuddering as burns past her tonsils.

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More gifts are presented, none as good as the one on her lap.

The smell of smoke and cooking meat filter in from somewhere in the distance.

Will drinks until her stomach refuses to take it. Then she just sits there, keeping the puppy locked loosely in her arms.

The crowd has calmed somewhat—not as sedate as they were in the very beginning, but no longer the screeching, bloodthirsty mass they'd become. The two girls stand by one of the tables, giggling with each other like harmless children under the watch of the man who threw the knife. Alana had drifted over to them at some point, speaking with him in between small bites of an apple.

But all conversation stops when Hannibal stands, each voice blinking out nearly simultaneously. Eyes seek him out en masse and he says something that seems to be half directed at them, half at her.

The Crawfords stand up then, too, Frederick following them, and Alana throws a glance in her direction before setting her apple down and making her way back over.

“The Khal is ready to give you his gift,” she says, stopping at the foot of the steps.

But all Will hears is, *he’s ready to leave*. And as much as she knew this moment was coming —as much as it’s hung heavy over her head, weighing her down with its inevitability—her heart still lurches and drops, her joints locking. Her throat closes up and her chest constricts and the world does a little flip, and by the time it rights itself, everyone is staring at her expectantly, the atmosphere quickly becoming awkward.

Frederick clears his throat pointedly and she finally takes a hitching breath, one leg uncurling out from under her. She pushes herself up with one arm, the puppy tucked under the other, and stands there unmoving until Hannibal specifically motions for her to follow with a twitch of his fingers.

The crowd parts around them without prompting. She steps over browning bloodstains as he leads her past the tables, out to the fringes of the gathering.

His horse is waiting there, tall and elegant, black mane and coat groomed so fastidiously they practically *shine*, even in the dying light. It’s flicking its tail, head angled down to press its nose close to that of the horse next to it.

It—she’s—shorter, smaller, but beautiful, with a pure white coat and matching mane. Her eyes stand out starkly, big and black surrounded by long, dainty white lashes, and the tip of her snout is a soft gray, nearly matching the color of her polished hooves.

“A mare is the traditional wedding gift of a Khal to his Khaleesi,” says Alana. She’s taken up a spot a little off to the side, next to Frederick and the Crawfords. “She’s of the best stock, broken just for you.”

Now Lady Crawford’s words are back again, *be polite*, but Will doesn’t want to. She might like the horse but she doesn’t want to thank this man for *anything*—not for a wedding gift, not even for an *army*—

But something—maybe self-preservation or a fear of the unknown, of what might happen—forces a smile onto her face.

“She’s beautiful,” she murmurs, eyes darting along his cheekbones and up to his forehead. She reaches out her free hand and runs it down the mare’s neck, getting a bob of the head and a flick of the ears from her in return.

And then—then Hannibal makes another motion, one horribly clear.

*Get on*.

Will swallows convulsively, hand falling away. The puppy squirms and she tightens her arm around him, maybe a little too much, but the feel of his side against her, going steadily in and out with breath, seems to her like her last reprieve, her last second of near-peace.

And then it ends. She hands him to Alana and all that’s left is the cold and the sweat dripping down the back of her neck.

“His name is Winston,” Will tells her, abruptly certain. She doesn’t know why she picked it —she can’t remember where she first heard it or what the name means—but maybe that’s why she likes it. No associations.

“That’s a nice name,” says Alana genially, with a carefully reassuring smile.

*Reassuring*, perhaps, because she sympathizes, because she’s *almost* been here. Will, as she is, can’t fathom whatever it was in her that let her make that choice, to run and let it all go, and isn’t even sure she wants to. It might not be something she can afford, not now.

As it is, her resolve is like a physical thing, tugged back and forth inside of her. The fear makes it falter but then it claws its way back, and she manages to put her hands up on the saddle and her foot in the stirrup.

Frederick rushes to help her and it’s all she can do not to kick him in the face as she arranges herself awkwardly, both legs on one side. She’s never been a proficient horseback rider—unlike, it seems, Hannibal, who swings himself up into the saddle in one seamless motion.

Frederick mouths something at her. She doesn’t bother looking closely, as she can already guess what he has to say.

Her hands clench around the reins, leather digging into her palms as the mare bites against the bit, and the foot hanging free of the stirrup twitches, just inches from his temple.

(*One sharp kick*, whisper-hiss the malformed pieces of Hannibal’s psyche from where they scratch against the barriers of her skull.)

She takes a deep, steadying breath, dragging one arm up over her forehead to dry it.

Beside her, Hannibal’s horse is impatient, snorting and swishing its tail as its master sits motionless and observes her. His gaze is veiled, inscrutable, and this time she feels more herself than him, stifled and displayed like a bug under a looking glass. There’s something almost reminiscent of Frederick in his expression—something *clinical,* a keen interest she doesn’t read as sexual.

Frederick has always been like a *pin*, scraping light and thin over her surface, ineffectual even though it draws blood. But Hannibal seems like—like a *dagger*, something sharp and precise and waiting to cut deep. She feels as though he’s vivisecting her, picking apart every aspect of her appearance to hold squirming in his hands, and learning more from it than he should.

It seems like it goes on and on, even though he probably doesn’t look for more than a few seconds before he spurs his horse forward. It breaks into an easy trot, which she stiffly, gently, prods the mare into imitating.

They ride for a good twenty minutes, their path winding and uneven. Dusk darkens until the only thing to see by is moonlight, and when Will glances over her shoulder, she can just glimpse the flickering dots of the party’s fires. She can still hear them raging, low, muffled voices carrying on the wind, but she can’t smell the cooking meat anymore and for only a

second, she imagines *separation*. Those lights are a ship and she's floating in the sea, surrounded on all sides by dark nothing, and she's apart from *everything*.

It all pops like a bubble, of course, when the horses stop. Hannibal's arm is out, hand high on the mare's reins to keep her still.

Will slides down, legs unsteady under her from the second she lands. It's like she's taking them instead of them taking her as she goes, off as far as she can. It's not much, just a few feet to the edge of the ground and then the drop, tall and dizzying down into the water. The sea is smooth like black glass except where the waves lap foamy against the rocks, and she watches the moonlight twist and dance along the surface, dying and recreating itself with the movement of the water.

It would just take one instant in the air and then there would be an eternity under the waves, muted and cushioned and peaceful. She would have everything life never gave her and everything else would remain, as unchanged as if she never existed because for all of her years she has been nothing. Her line is dead and the usurper sits on its throne convinced of that, blissful in his ignorance, and if she takes one step, she can make it a truth by her own insignificance.

Hannibal's gaze is heavy on her back and tears burn behind her eyes, maybe ones of fear or maybe—maybe *anger*, at herself, because this is her last opportunity, sitting there right in front of her with every reason to take, but she just can't make herself *do it*.

So instead Will reaches up to her head and tugs on the crown of flowers. It comes away with a sting, hairs caught twisted in the stems, and she lets her thumb trace the edge of a rose petal before she drops it into the water. She watches with the closest thing to satisfaction she's felt in a long time as it's picked up by the current, the slight weight gentled out into deeper waters.

She's not the Queen of Love and Beauty, but she *is* a Queen. Unknown, but one day her rose crown will wash up on that distant shore and the *land* will understand, even if no man does—she's *alive*. She exists, and soon, soon . . . she will be there.

She steels herself, then, and wipes away the wetness from her face.

She walks back to Hannibal and clenches her eyes shut and imagines—imagines with everything she is that she's somewhere else, high up on a throne, and that the touch of his skin and the scrape of his nails are the cold slide of fused iron swords, an exquisite pain she swears that Frederick Chilton will never know.

Chapter End Notes

Somewhere, a dwarf racist party dad named Thranduil is weeping because his war elk-stag thing has left him to go stalk a young girl.

So, this chapter was delayed by:
1) Thilbo Bagginshield feels
2) Television shows that aren't Hannibal
3) An evil addicting game called Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney: Dual Destinies
4) Procrastination and writer's block

And it was ultimately brought to you by:
1) Booze
2) Compulsive overeating

I think this is literally the longest chapter I've ever written for anything. Much like this author's note, IT WOULD NOT END. It just kept DRAGGING in the middle.

As a side note, I don't think Daenerys Targaryen would like being crowned the Queen of Love and Beauty very much, given the shitstorm it brought down on her family. But the back story I've (kind of) worked out for Will's family and it's downfall, while somewhat similar, doesn't involve that aspect and HOW COULD I RESIST PUTTING IN A FLOWER CROWN?

Ahem. So, thank you all so very, very much for your kudos and comments! They really make my day!

The chapter title comes from the song "Royals" by Lorde.

PS: I noticed that some people take this opportunity to link to their tumblr, so since I have one, I thought . . . why not? Here: http://willowoftheriver.tumblr.com/

# you're death and living reconciled

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mornings after a sleepless night are always somehow gray no matter how bright the sun is, the world tired and faded and filtering in too slowly past her eyes.

On this morning, Will is slumped and heavy in her chair, the too-cool air irritating whatever exposed skin it can find. It carries the scent from the food spread out on the table in front of her, but even though she's barely eaten in over a day, it doesn't appeal to her.

They're on one of the back porches of the Crawford estate, but Will doesn't know if the food came from the Crawford kitchen. It's mostly recognizable breakfast fare, though as loaded with meat as the wedding feast had been—even the porridge, thick and smelling of some spice-herb mixture she can't identify, has little bits of it mixed throughout.

There is a basket of fruit off to the side, but Will doesn't reach for it, nor does she drink or fidget. She barely blinks, barely swallows her own saliva.

She's stiff and sticky and disjointed and seeping through her own fingers. If she was water in a glass, she'd be leaking. She's not her own in a way she's never been before and all she can manage is stillness and silence.

Hannibal's fork clinks against the plate and somewhere up past her forehead, just at the edge of her vision, she can see movement. One thing (the only thing) she can say is that she doesn't know anything more about him. For the first time in her life, she'd been so focused on herself, on trying *not* to focus on what was happening, that even her insanity had hung suspended, nonfunctioning in spite of the physical closeness.

As for what of him that's already there, she's tried to wall it off, to build a fort where it can choke in its own gore without seeping into the rest of her. (Separating herself from what she feels of others has never been something she's good at, but oh, how she's trying now.)

He's watching her. She can feel it in the way her skin prickles, an unfaltering, unnatural stare that sets her teeth on edge, but she just glares at the table, because she doesn't want to see him. She doesn't want to be anywhere *near* him, not with the memory of the night before and her blood still between his legs.

If it had been by anyone else, she would've been thrilled when the meal was interrupted. But nothing ever goes in her favor, so Frederick is the one who sidles out onto the porch, looking rested and smug.

"Khal Hannibal," he says, and the deferential tilt of his head is barely there, just enough to say he did it. "I just wanted to see how the newlyweds were doing this morning, especially considering you did exactly what I told you not to at the reception." His tone stays perfectly

pleasant, his smile never faltering, but his eyes are frosty with the same anger of the day before.

“Yet you don’t seem disappointed with the outcome,” she says, and finally one of her arms moves, heavy and awkward, to rest on the table. She picks up a fork and mutilates food on her plate just to give herself something else to focus on.

Frederick gives Hannibal a sidelong glance. “As long as he isn’t.”

Will sips water to save her the trouble of replying.

He shifts and sighs and stares at her. “I’m not trying to make things harder for you, Will. I think you think I am, but I’m not. It’s not like I care about the savage’s pleasure. But this marriage has to stay *solid* until we’re across that sea.”

He stoops over beside her, hands on the table, and his smile becomes a bit more genuine. “And then we’ll take the capital, and the throne, and this will all become just like a bad dream.”

Will looks questioningly at the area of his nose. He chuckles.

“The nobles won’t accept some foreign cannibal warlord as the Graham-Queen’s husband. They won’t even recognize this marriage as *valid*. So play the bitch for now, Will, with the knowledge that the better job you do of it, the sooner it’ll be over.”

He straightens back up, lips twitching, and turns on his heels, slanting his head to Hannibal once again as he leaves the way he came, the door clicking shut behind him.

“He is gruesome, isn’t he? Do you think he wants you sexually?”

Will blinks at the empty spot where Frederick stood, breath catching in her throat. Then her head whips towards him to catch the next sentence, accented but well formed and flowing and perfectly pronounced.

“Or maybe what he really desires is what you represent. All those kingdoms, your father’s ugly iron throne—maybe *that’s* what he’d far rather touch.”

“You speak the Common Tongue,” says Will, dumb and accusatory.

“Yes,” says Hannibal simply.

And that’s—that’s *infuriating*, so much that she can’t help but repeat it in outrage. “*You speak* the Common Tongue.”

“Is that really so hard to believe? It’s widespread in the free port cities.”

“And yet all this time, an entire *wedding*, knowing it’s the only thing I understand, you never even—” Her own anger strangles the rest of the words in her throat, because it had just been one more thing on top of all the rest, another problem, another concern. She wouldn’t even be able to have the most basic communication with her cannibal warmonger husband because

they didn't speak the same language. Only they actually *do*, but he just never deigned to tell her.

"People's tongues have a tendency to become looser when they think you cannot listen. It provides some interesting insights." He tips his head sideways to the door. "Such as into your guardian. Your interactions certainly seem . . ."

He pauses to search for the word, but she doesn't want to hear what he comes up with.

"It's none of your business," she interrupts harshly. Phyllis Crawford told her to be polite, and Will did because she feared what she found in his head. But she's never excelled at social niceties and this morning, she doesn't care. She's lost the capacity.

"It is when he's already plotting against me. Surely he knows that just because your people declare the marriage invalid, mine won't see it that way, and losing their support will end your reign just as it begins. Who will defend you against them? The devastated armies of your liege lords? No."

"Then what do you think he's really planning?" she bites out.

"A widowed Khaleesi would still have a place, a leg to stand on with the next Khal."

"Someone plotting to murder you isn't exactly uncommon. That's just Westerosi politics," she says with a carless half-shrug. Frederick generally told her stories about the riches and the leisure and the glory of being monarch, but from others she's heard things that cast a different light on the court, a darker one. "Betrayal is an art there. You didn't have to get involved."

"The cities up and down the shore have all been drained dry by decades of sacking and paying tribute. Raids are becoming less profitable. And things are changing. There's a saying amongst your people, is there not? 'Winter is coming'. Twenty years ago, there was no winter here, but last year there was snow on the ground for two months."

Will remembers that. Frederick had been in the mood to indulge her because cooler weather and light snow reminded him of home. He'd told her how children threw balls and made angel patterns, but what she enjoyed most was fishing like the men of the North—cutting a hole in the ice of a frozen lake and sitting there with a line, lost amongst the falling flakes and endless white.

She'd still been a child then, however you wanted to measure it—unflowered, unwed, virginal. She's wondered if things could've gone differently if when she felt the seep down her legs and saw the red bloom on the pale material of her dress that following spring, she'd lied, hid it, pretended it hadn't happened. It could've bought her a year. A few months. Anything.

"I wouldn't think that would be a problem for you," she says, sparing a pointed, disgusted glance at the food.

“People in the cities and villages would begin to die, too, only a little while after their livestock. And whatever number of our horses that didn’t starve would be so weak, the army would be rendered immobile, unable to even get to anyone who remained.”

She snorts, casts her eyes up to the ceiling. “You mean you wouldn’t eat each other?”

“Not routinely. Fortune wasn’t with Nicholas last night, I’m afraid.”

“And that makes him okay to eat?”

“He lost the right not to be. But a hundred thousand cannot be sustained for months on criminals and the defeated.”

“You won’t escape winter across the sea. And I’m not going to let you go around sacking my cities after I’m on the throne.”

“We shouldn’t have to.”

“But only if things remain stable between us.”

“I don’t see why they couldn’t. We both have motivation to make this alliance last.”

“Then maybe—” And she knows she’s about to push it, but she’s feeling nihilistic, disconnected and too close at the same time and completely imploding in on herself. “—we should both keep in mind that that’s all we are. Allies.”

But Hannibal just seems faintly *amused*. “Of course. May your Seven Gods forbid we ever become *friendly.*”

She stands up because the air with its food scents is suffocating her and the walls are closing in, table jerking and chair screeching across the stone. “We’re married, we don’t need to be friendly.”

She walks briskly to the door, pacing her steps until she’s around the frame and then she bolts, taking off like a scared little animal. She takes the first staircase she sees two steps at a time and only slows when she’s within range of her room, barking a demand at a maidservant for a bath to be drawn.

She hears the cadence of voices as she passes Frederick’s door and stops to lean against it, hissing in breaths and staring at her own door down the hall as the servants start to bustle in.

“—have offered to let her stay here until the Khal is ready to invade.” The sounds sharpen into words as she focuses, and it takes her half a second to place the voice as Alana’s.

Frederick laughs, his disbelief clear. “She’s his *wife*. She has to go where he goes.”

“Life on the road with the tribe is hard,” Alana persists. “Harder than anything you’ve ever known, here or in Westeros. And she’s just a child!”

“She’s a woman wed.”

“Twelve hours of marriage doesn’t suddenly make anyone an adult. How *old* is she? Three and ten?”

“Khal Hannibal needs to remember where his priorities lie,” says Frederick in irritation.

“You think he’d just *forget* the plans to invade?”

“No. But I think that it will be a much faster process if he has a flesh and blood reminder beside him.”

Will doesn’t want to listen anymore. She’s nauseous.

The wet heat of her room doesn’t help that, but she swallows the bile and dismisses the servants and lets the steam roll over her.

She leaves her dress in a crumpled pile in front of the hearth where she intends to burn it and steps down into the water. This time she can feel it when it scalds her, reddening her skin and stinging scraped knees and palms.

Frederick said that one day this would all seem like a nightmare long woken up from, but he’s wrong. Her mind lets her see enough of other people to learn a lot of things, and one of her most universal lessons has been that some wounds, no matter how old, never truly heal. The slightest word, and they bleed again.

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Alana knocks on her door just as she finishes dressing. She’s still fumbling with the tie at the back of her waist, the silk slipping in her fingers like water. Today her dress is red, violent and flowing like blood.

Alana’s smile is perfunctory, run through with hesitation and concern, and she drags bloodshot eyes over her, lingering in some places. Will is tired of people looking at her like that, as if they’re trying to pick her apart one element at a time.

“I can help you with that, Your Grace,” Alana says finally, when she seems to realize how awkward the silence is.

“No,” is her reply. There are servants if she wanted help, but she hasn’t asked for it since she was four. “And, um,” she continues awkwardly to offset the bluntness, “you can just call me Will.”

Alana’s lips twitch. “Okay, Will. When you’re ready, I’d like to introduce you to your handmaidens—Hannibal wants you to start learning the language and how to ride, and one of them will be in charge of that.”

“I know how to ride.”

“Like a lady in King’s Landing, not like a woman of the tribe. But before we go, I wanted to give you these.” She shifts her arms, and Will notices the books she’s carrying, a stack of old, leather bound tomes with gold leaf pages.

Settling for just flipping the two ends of the tie haphazardly around each other a few times, Will takes the books and puts them on the desk in the corner of the room, opening the top one.

“They’re all I could find about Westeros,” says Alana, voice accompanied by a few light steps. “The histories and lineages of most of the noble Houses, accounts of reigns and wars, descriptions of the culture.”

Will skims the calligraphy as best she can, picking out words and banners and names—Gideon, Zeller, Crawford, Verger, Lounds, Chilton. She even sees House Bloom, a banner with a colorful peacock against a drab brown background.

Then there’s Graham, with its snarling dog and the motto, *This is my design.* Extinct House, it reads below, ousted nearly fourteen years ago.

“Thank you,” says Will quietly. “Though, I’ll need a magnifying glass. My eyes aren’t good up close.” Or very far away, either. (*Inbreeding*, she’d once heard Frederick sneer when he thought she wasn’t listening.)

“I’ll find one,” assures Alana.

Will glances back down to the page, and her eye is drawn to one entry, so blurred she isn’t sure she’s even reading it right. “Is this true? There was a queen before Fredericka?”

Alana nods and beckons her to follow, talking as she walks. “Margot of the House of Verger. It was a huge scandal about ten years ago, though you would’ve been too young to remember if Maester Frederick talked about it.”

Winston is in the hall, sitting in an awkward puppy way with his tail thumping against the ground. He runs over to her, body wiggling, when he sees her, and she scoops him up and clutches him to her chest.

“What happened?”

“Queen Margot gave birth to a child that was blond of hair.”

Will blinks, and Alana shoots her something of a sly glance over her shoulder.

“Unfortunately for her, all the children of House Gideon are unfailingly *brown* of hair.”

“*Ah*,” says Will.

“House Verger was the wealthiest in the realm, but that didn’t save Margot’s father, or her child. Now there *isn’t* a House Verger.”

“What about Margot herself?”

“No one knows. She—and her brother—disappeared. I suppose it’s possible King Abel had her executed quietly, but that’s not really his . . . *style*.”

*Respect-power-money-armies-land, but it's not enough, never enough. Inside there's fire-lust-cruelty-hate clawing through my skin, and now I'm King and* everyone *will feel it. This is my design.*

Will shakes herself, trying to fling away Abel Gideon's undeveloped psyche before it can take root and start to grow.

"He's a horrible King," she nearly spits. "Frederick says that the people still call him Usurper, that they sew Graham flags and pray to the Seven that one day the Throne will return to legitimate hands."

Alana halts just as they cross outside and turns to look at her, the touch of pity and condescending in her expression not well hid.

Will deflates and looks at the ground. *Another of Frederick's lies*.

"Gideon isn't fit to be King, that's true. He was really better at getting the Throne than sitting in it. There are a lot of the noble Houses who would see him out of power. But . . . the commoners don't pay much attention to the politics of the highborn. Not as long as they're getting by."

Was *everything* Frederick ever told her about Westeros untrue? All pretty lies to wind her up, just so that one day he could watch her go?

"Khaleesi!"

Will looks up dully at the approach of two familiar girls, clinging together as they step in unison up onto the marble entranceway. One of them is the girl who killed a man last night, and the other was the one who'd thrown a rock at him when he'd first made himself known.

Alana smiles and steps between them. "Here they are. Khaleesi, this is Abigail and this is Marissa. Hannibal has selected them to be your handmaidens. Abigail speaks the Common Tongue, so she'll be your language instructor."

Abigail, the killer, elaborates: "I've been going with my father to trade in the cities since I could walk, so I picked it up pretty quickly. That and Valyrian."

"But your sister only speaks Dothraki?" She supposes that's all right, considering she usually doesn't do much talking to the servants, though she's never had any that are there to cater exclusively to her.

"She's not my sister," says Abigail after a heavy pause.

Will narrows her eyes and rakes her gaze over them again. She catches on the entwined arms and something sparks in the middle of her head, bleeding foreign warm feelings.

"Oh," she says blankly. "You're . . ."

"It's not uncommon here," Alana interjects.

Will's stunned for a beat, not least of all because they both seem so young—but evidently older than she'd thought. Then it fades as quickly as it came, because she realizes she doesn't really care. There are other things about her new handmaidens for her to worry about.

What she saw Abigail do the night before is still vivid behind her eyes, and looking at the girl, who looks back with narrowed eyes and crossed arms, Will gets the impression that she doesn't want to be here, doesn't want to be a servant.

In Westeros, the Queen's ladies in waiting came only from the noble houses, and to serve her was to be vied for, if only to get in her favor.

But they're not in Westeros. She never has been.

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"Have you named your horse?"

"Rhaelyn," grunts Will. "After my mother."

Her muscles are screaming, and it's only been an hour. Legs, back, arms, shoulders, neck, and a few places she hadn't even previously been aware of.

As it turns out, riding like a Dothraki woman is *nothing* like the gentrified pleasure riding of the Westeros court. Putting her legs on either side of the horse is something Will can get behind, but the positions and exercises Abigail has her doing to '*build endurance'* generally become painful after a few minutes, and galloping when she'd never previously gone faster than a canter is . . . disconcerting.

Thankfully, however, questions and instructions from Abigail have started to slow. At about forty-five minutes in she began to look pale, and now she's a bit crouched, leaning with an elbow against the fence and whispering with Marissa, paying only passing attention.

Will slows Rhaelyn to a trot, dropping her stiff position to slouch down in the saddle. Her hands are sweaty around the reins and her dress is pulled stiff across the tops of her thighs, soaking in the odor of leather and horse.

After a few more cursory laps, she stops entirely, dismounting and patting Rhaelyn on the neck. The mare hasn't even broken a sweat and seems impatient, digging up clumps of grass and dirt with one of her hooves.

"I don't have a treat for you," says Will, letting her sniff her hands. "Sorry. Maybe I can find one later."

If she were human, she might've been glaring. But she does let Will lead her by the reins over to the handmaidens, where Winston pops up from his place by Marissa's feet and starts running between her legs.

"Is that enough for today?" Will asks.

Abigail straightens up quickly, though one arm lingers across her abdomen, her wrist digging in with enough force to strain the rough material of her dress.

“I think so,” she says, looking directly at her with her too-big blue eyes. Will focuses on her freckles, much more apparent now that her face is ashen. “Too much at once probably isn’t good for your muscles.”

“Okay,” she says, trying not to sound too pleased, and then stands there for an awkward beat. “Then I’ll just . . . go back to the house. It was nice, uh, meeting you.”

They don’t glance back at her as she starts walking stiffly up the grounds to the stables, where she takes off Rhaelyn’s saddle and bridle and turns her loose in a stall.

She’s looking around for an apple or carrot, her mind drifting to Abigail’s problem and then inevitably to her own blood (which should come soon but isn’t late, not yet) when a throat clears behind her.

She only starts a little, but Alana is apologetic anyway.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” she says, reaching out a hand through the bars on the stall of Hannibal’s horse. He pushes his nose into her palm. “But Hannibal asked me to find you when you were done. He’d like to meet with you in the east great room.”

Will’s hands clench behind her back. “I’m very tired.”

“I’m sure. The first lesson was the hardest for me, too.”

“And I need to find a treat for Rhaelyn.”

“I’ll get one for her.” She smiles at the horse she’s petting. “And one for you, Arnage.”

How very . . . *political* of her, dodging and parrying everything Will says instead of actually acknowledging that she doesn’t want to go, which would make her have to definitively take a side. Alana should’ve stayed on her island and played the game; she could’ve been good at it.

Will sets out from the stables with her lips pursed, focusing on the pain and stiffness in her muscles and on how *incredibly* pretentious the name ‘Arnage’ is, even in Westeros, to keep the fear at bay. It doesn’t work, and her hair is plastered to her head with sweat by the time she arrives. She hopes she reeks.

Hannibal stands at the back windows, facing away from her. He’s silent and still for a moment, and she’s struck by his clothes—almost on par with what he wore to the wedding, elaborate and tailored and expensive, nothing like the simple, functional outfits she’s seen on the other Dothraki.

And then, he turns around and throws something at her.

She jerks back automatically and it hits the floor with a metallic clang that echoes through the empty expanse of the room.

“You are now dead,” Hannibal announces. “Or would be, if this were a real fight.”

Will stares at the sword in front of her, mouth open, though she’s not sure what she plans to say. “Ladies don’t fight,” is what eventually comes out.

“But you have higher ambitions, Will. You intend to become a *conqueror*.”

“That’s why I have an army.”

“Military might is only part of it. The spectacle is another. Your ancestor Aegon understood, as did Abel Gideon. I’m told he cut your father’s head off himself and put it on a spike in his throne room.”

Will picks up the sword. Grips it until her knuckles go white.

“What made him so determined to end him? To watch the skin rot off his head every day until only bone was left?”

Will lunges and Hannibal sidesteps with an almost mocking ease, allowing her own momentum to work against her.

“He was a bad king,” she hisses, spinning only just in time to catch his blade with her own. The force of the blow knocks her back, and her arms scream and tremble in agony. “They called him ‘The Mad’.”

“Jack Crawford says that for your family, madness and greatness are two sides of the same coin. Every time a new Graham is born, your gods flip that coin into the air, and the world can only hold its breath and wait to see how it will land. The Graham dynasty ruled for hundreds of years, and your father wasn’t the first mad king it produced, nor probably the worst. Yet he was the only one to be overthrown.”

“Gideon—” Will hesitates, uses the seconds spent fumbling over her own feet to try to steady herself. “—accused my father of raping his wife.”

“An interesting choice of words, *accused*. Do you think he was innocent?”

Will has heard a story about her father, whispered behind her back whenever anyone is surprised to see that Queen Rhaelyn had a child. Abel Gideon’s good-father was burning and his good-brother slowly choking, and the Mad King was high and elated and aroused off the suffering. That’s when he sought out his lady wife. Her screams joined the moans and the gasps of the dying, and all anyone could do was stand and listen, even the Kingsguard, because they didn’t protect a Queen from her King.

But yet Will still has doubts about if he did the same thing to Lady Gideon, simply because of what happened later.

“He slaughtered his wife and all her remaining family at the dinner table his first Winter Solstice on the throne. Broke all the laws of sacred hospitality to destroy his own allies. Doesn’t seem to me to be the actions of a husband who went to war after his wife was dishonored. More like the vengeance of an angry cuckold.”

“Yet he held himself back long enough to use his version of events as a rallying cry for rebellion,” he says, understanding and maybe even passingly appreciative. Because of course one monster would admire another’s work.

“He’s drunk away any cunning he might’ve ever once had,” she insists.

Hannibal is quick and contained in his movement, well practiced and graceful in a way his size wouldn’t suggest. He holds himself like a dancer and strikes like a snake, and though it’s obvious he’s holding himself back, pacing himself so as to give her a chance to anticipate, she’s already lagging.

“Then it should make very little difference whether his head is on his shoulders or a pike.”

He flicks his wrist and somehow his blade twists her own out of her hands. Will stoops to pick it up, scowling.

“I shouldn’t have to become an executioner to be respected.”

Hannibal watches her, eyes veiled, and she gets an impression like a drawer sliding open in her mind: he likes to leave whomever he kills on display. To let the world see them like he does.

“If you were a man, they would respect you,” he says, retaking a ready stance.

She almost shakes her head, opens her mouth, but he continues.

“But as you are a woman, they’ll cling to their preconceived notions of what you should be. They won’t understand you. And they’ll fear you.”

Will wants a lot of things, but to be feared has never been one of them.

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Later, she sits on a stool in the kitchen, stinking of animal and sweat, sipping tea and drawing glances from the staff.

She aches, everywhere. The minute pull to keep herself balanced is like needles up and down her calves, and somehow, even her teeth hurt in their sockets.

The tea is overly aromatic and not particularly pleasant tasting, but in the year since she’s flowered, she’s gotten used to it. As Frederick explained it, the leaves it was made with relaxed muscles to relieve cramping, though the affects have always extended beyond her belly to weaken her limbs whenever she’s drunk it in the past.

Today she welcomes that slow spread, teetering on her seat as the warmth extends out to her nails.

She drains the cup dry and hands it back to one of the servants, asking for another—but pennyroyal this time, because the sooner the bleeding comes, the better. Then she sips that and her thoughts turn to Abigail, pale and pained and distant.

Will hasn't had much interaction with girls near her own age, and children and adults alike have always thought her strange, not someone worth getting to know.

Neither Abigail nor Marissa is there to be her friend, and she isn't even sure if she would want to be with someone who can gut a man and taste his blood. But they're her servants and her teachers and she doesn't want things to be *cold* between them, for there for be nothing there except, at most, *resentment*.

Of course, social interaction is not her forte, but she feels that showing concern is a universal enough gesture. When she finishes her cup she grabs a small pouch of the dry painkilling leaves and sets out to check on her, walking down to the edge of the property where the Dothraki have pitched their tents.

Fires are being lit for the fast approaching night, the smell of roasting meat strengthening the longer she spends roaming the maze of pathways through the encampment. Eyes follow her constantly, some curious, some suspicious.

Eventually, she stops and asks which tent is Abigail's, trying to get her point across by saying the girl's name repeatedly and making some gestures. She's directed to one a few hundred feet away, sitting catticornered by an expanse of grass where a few horses wander free, grazing.

She approaches slowly, her legs a bit tingly now in place of the pain, and is almost within touching distance when the flaps move and someone falls out.

Will hesitates, confused, walking again when the person doesn't start getting up. Then she gets close enough to see, to smell the blood as it pours from the woman's neck, pooling in the grass and staining her blonde hair.

The pouch falls from her hands just as there comes a noise, a choked off scream from inside the tent, and she darts in before she even knows what she's doing, the sword Hannibal insisted she keep gripped in her hand.

Abigail's eyes are bloodshot and terrified, her chest heaving up and down against the arm across it.

"Put her—let her go," she says, and it's in the Common Tongue and gods, *does he even understand*?

She thinks he does. But the man—middle aged, familiar from the wedding—drags his knife across Abigail's neck anyway.

She hits the floor in a twitching pile, gurgling on the blood that bubbles past her lips, and Will—Will's blade sinks into him, a slide that goes on forever and meets so very little resistance.

Then it's out and back in again and again and again, blood splashing into her mouth to join the bile already there, her heart in her throat and her blood rushing through her veins and in her ears and behind her eyes.

Finally the hilt slips from her fingers, leaving her hands to drip as she stares at the ragged mess that was once his chest.

He staggers back until his legs give out and he collapses against the wall, meeting her gaze with too bright eyes. Blue, like Abigail's. Like his daughter's.

"See?" he says. "See?"

He repeats it and repeats it, until the blood stops flowing and he has no air left.

.

She screamed.

She thinks she did. She must've.

She screamed and she put her hands on Abigail's neck, more red across her palms as she pressed down to stop the bleeding. But it didn't stop, just welled up around her fingers and kept flowing.

Then there were other hands there to take her place, steady and sure against the wound, and she was being led away. Someone's fingers curled over her shoulders, guiding her out and around the corpse and back towards the house.

They passed Jack Crawford when they got inside, who looked alarmed and shouted something. She could feel the vibration of his voice but the words didn't make it through the buzzing in her ears.

Did anyone answer him? She doesn't know, because then she was sitting in her bathroom and someone—also familiar, a pale blonde, icy and beautiful—was wiping the blood off her face with a rag.

Bedelia (and even though Will can't remember it, she must've introduced herself, because now she's certain that's her name) talks as she works, with a voice to match her appearance.

"—recently Garret has been acting—" is all Will catches.

Garret. She didn't even know his name when she killed him.

Servants are blurs in the corners of her eyes, drawing a bath. They pull her dress off and she stares at it as she's pushed into the water, the heap of red fabric that doesn't show the blood it's suffused with.

*Suffused*, like perhaps she is with the madness and cruelty and bloodlust of her conception. She can feel it in her now, like a contaminant on her basest level, and when she finally manages to sleep that night, it seeps into her dreams.

*I have something precious and perfect and mine, my possession and no other's. But reality is closing in and that perfect thing is slipping through my fingers, and all that I can do is*

consume *it. Kill it and eat it and make it part of me, so I will always have it. This is my design.*

She walks the breathing spaces of Garret's mind and they sing to her, all while a Raven Feathered Stag whispers in his ear.

.

"Is Abigail alive?"

She stands in the middle of the east great room in the faded early morning light, hand loose around the pommel of a sword, new and clean. There's blood caked under her nails, deep into the quick.

"Yes," says Hannibal. "Her jugular wasn't hit."

"Will she *stay* alive?"

"Barring infection."

Infections have a tendency to come on all too quickly, and then take their toll with similar speed. Her mother died of infected blood just twelve hours after Will was born.

Abigail could still slip away, snuffed out like a candle's flame. Will wishes she wasn't able to understand why a father could do that to his daughter.

"You did all you could, Will," Hannibal assures her, his voice carefully pitched to be soothing and supportive. "You did the *only* thing you could."

"I *killed* a man," she hisses, though she doesn't know why she bothers. It's not like *he* could ever view it in the way she does, attach the same significance to it.

"And Abigail is better off for it."

"If she lives. And she's not even the first." She mutters the last, certain though she has no proof beyond what's in her head. Not the first, not the second, not even the third.

Hannibal brings his sword down, so abruptly she can only half meet him. Her arms waver under the pressure and she takes a step back, trying to keep her balance as she pulls up for the next blow.

"Uncle Jack tells me you have a unique mind. No barriers, like the rest of us have. No filters to keep out the things you don't want to know. You have mirrors in your skull that reflect the truth of other people. Are you worried, when you look at someone like Garret, that you'll get lost in that reflection? That one day, you'll be unable to distinguish yourself from someone else?"

Will brings her blade against his with such force it almost bounces off, the metal screeching as it meets. "Don't try to analyze me," she nearly shouts, because she's had that her entire

life, not just from Frederick but from anyone who's ever found her amusing, like a sideshow to watch and try to casually dissect.

But then the pendulum starts swinging in her head and Hannibal's limping, malformed psyche expands, growing fat with her new understanding.

"But that's why you're here, isn't it? You don't *need* me, I'm not necessary when you have no reason to make your invasion legitimate. You don't want my title, or my blood. You want my *mind*, to—to see which way the coin fell."

Her arms hurt even more now than they originally did after a night of the muscles settling and stiffening, but she keeps swinging, hacking away with wild, uncoordinated strikes. "So? What did you find? Or do you want me to kill someone *else*?"

Finally Hannibal stops defending, making the same move as he did yesterday to twist the sword out of her hand. Only this time her legs aren't steady and she hits the floor with it, panting and tangled in the skirt of her dress.

Then he's closer than he should be, beside her with a hand on her knee, thumb catching a drop of blood running down the inside. For a moment she wonders when she cut herself and then an instant later she realizes that it's not a wound, it's the pennyroyal taking affect.

First she's humiliated, because it's nothing he should ever see—and then she recoils in disgust when he brings his bloody thumb to his mouth and sucks it clean between his lips.

"I think something went wrong," he says, lowering his head between her thighs and following that trail of blood up, up, up. "When your coin landed, it wasn't flat. Instead, it started to spin. It still does, and now even all your gods can do is watch, and wait, and hold their breath for the day it finally falls."

His mouth brushes her on the last words, and then his tongue starts lapping at blood and slick, tracing over and around and finally in.

Will breathes in the scent of blood through pleasure and thinks about death, about taking life, about cutting off Abel Gideon's head and putting it on a spike.

She wonders if it would feel as horrible as killing Garret had.

And somewhere, in a place far deeper and darker in her mind, she wonders if it would feel as good.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't die. No, it's just that my living situation completely imploded, which isn't surprising, as it's happened pretty much like clockwork about every three years since I've been born. (Landlords are one of the lowest forms of life.) In this time, there's been

a crisis to find another house, angry emails have been sent, I've threatened to castrate a man with a butterfly knife, our front door has been barricaded, lawyers have been called, psychiatrists have been seen, a guard dog is possibly going to be purchased, and now we're finally just two weeks away from move time. So pretty much a normal move for my family.

The first little section of the chapter was the hardest to write. I mean, over half of all this time was just spent on that one part.

So I decided to go with my first inclination and make Gideon the king just because his dinnertime slaughter rang so similar to the Red Wedding that I couldn't help myself. And as for the Vergers . . . *laughs evilly*

Your kudos and comments sustain me, for I am an eldritch abomination that consumes them.

The chapter title comes from the song 'Dream On' by Depeche Mode.

-Anna

(PS: Oh, and to avoid confusion, I'll mention that pennyroyal at high doses brings on miscarriage, as it's most known for, but low doses will just trigger a period. Parsley does the same thing.)

(PPS: There are some nearly direct quotes from Game of Thrones and Hannibal scattered throughout here. So if you recognize it, it's probably not mine.)

# interlude: i've come to burn your kingdom down

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Fredericka of the House of Lounds was very young, her mother—clever, devious Mother—told her that life was, at its core, a series of games, and that the most treacherous one that could ever be played was for a throne.

Freddie had always been her mother's favorite child, over and above any son she would ever have, and for that brief visit to the capital, while her sisters sat with their Septas and her brothers watched the tourney, she and her mother attended court.

The throne room was crowded, with petitioners and nobles and officials, and Mother told her to imagine that they were all players on a board, vicious little pawns that would do anything, tear each other to pieces, if only to get just the slightest bit closer to that iron chair towering high above them.

It was a misshapen thing, with half melted blades running every way across it, their metal so tarnished so as to almost be black. The back was spiked and even as far away as she was, the edges of all the swords seemed to glint, promising pain.

It was ugly, made even worse by the form of Queen Rhaelyn sitting in it. She was beautiful in the way of her father's House, backwards, Southern swamp-Lords that they were, and even though she was still childless at eight and ten, she carried herself as though she was unimpeachable, her fine silver crown high and glistening on her head.

She was holding court that day, most likely while her husband was off being plied with sedatives by the Maesters. They didn't let him in public when he was being too outrageously mad—the Queen Dowager had still been alive then, able to exercise her modicum of control.

So Rhaelyn sat with her legs daintily crossed and her fine gold bangles clinking against hard iron, running her fingers over and over the blades of her ancestors' defeated enemies. She never cut herself in all the hours she sat there, the victor doing her dance with all the little envious ants so low at her feet, weaving her design with the skill of a spider weaving a web.

That was the day that Freddie started playing the game.

.

In the beginning, Freddie had resolved herself to marry the next Graham Prince, whenever Rhaelyn got around to spreading her legs and birthing him. She hoped that maybe, if the gods were kind, he would be handsome and stupid and he wouldn't have any sisters. But even if he did, Freddie had an answer for that.

Her sanity was a double edged sword, because Grahams valued madness in their own twisted way—they were possessive of it, confining it in their bloodline and passing it down, brother

and sister to brother and sister. But while Freddie didn't have the oh-so vaunted dog's blood, her clarity of thought had its practical advantages, such as for long term strategy. Ever since she was old enough for sophisticated thought, she'd had her next four or five or ten plays in the game all mapped out, waiting to fall like dominoes.

Even if Rhaelyn had suddenly became fecund in later life, if she'd had ten daughters slither out of her womb, Freddie had plans for them, nurtured lovingly in the back of her mind for years and years. In the end, there would be no sisters, no cousins, no aunts—just her, with her wrong blood and her healthy brain. (And he would want her, oh how he would want her.)

But no matter how well she constructed her plans, at that time King's Landing was very far away from her, the people and events there completely out of her control. She nearly wept the day her father and oldest brothers went off to war, bitter tears not out of worry for them but because that wasn't how it was supposed to have gone.

She expects she wasn't the only one who thought that. A lot of things burned in those months and in the ashes the world reordered itself, bringing with it an entirely new game.

And when Freddie finally arrived in King's Landing again, years after her first visit, it wasn't the Mad King sat on the throne, but Abel Gideon, the rebel, the Usurper, and his new Verger queen.

That was when Freddie learned that some wars weren't won by poison—that sometimes, information was the most powerful weapon.

.

Clarice Starling is ambitious, and Freddie doesn't like her. She dislikes her in the same way she had Alana Bloom, who had once strutted through court in her garish dresses with her head held higher than Queen Rhaelyn, drawing Abel's eye so very easily away from his pretty Verger bride.

The Bloom girl is long gone now, but in her place is this polished little rube, a child from another of those Southern backwater houses with cheap clothes and an accent she can barely hide. She isn't particularly pretty, either, with her bland face and dull brown hair, yet there is a way about her—an intelligence that lets her bolster what little she has, parlay it into something that catches attention. In her months at court she's gathered an inordinate amount of admirers, but while that's what Freddie takes issue with, it's also provided her with an opportunity. The girl isn't stupid, true, but she hasn't been at court for nearly long enough, and there is carelessness in her naivety. It hadn't taken much for Freddie to learn how many of those interested men she'd taken up on their offers, and with just a few careful words in the right places, she'd lit a fuse of rumors and scandal that had finally burned to its end.

Starling's uncle looks beside himself, glaring at his niece out of the corner of his eye even as he extols her virtues.

"She would *never*—" he rambles on, as he has been for the last five minutes.

“Are you saying he forced himself on her?” asks Freddie, fingers tracing over and over the smooth gray surface of a melted blade. She loves and hates this throne in equal measure, because to sit in it is the ultimate victory but always there are those sharp edges digging in, reminding that no victory is permanent, no power absolute. To sit here is the most precarious position in the game.

“It’s all been misconstrued,” says Starling, her vowels getting a bit long. “It was just a kiss. There’s nothing between Ser Paul and me.”

“Oh? I thought he made you his Queen of Love and Beauty at the tourney a month past?”

“He did,” she admits grudgingly. “But that was just—”

“And it’s understandable, isn’t it? It’s something every girl dreams of. Add to that the sweet words and promises men tend to give and how could anyone possibly blame you? But Ser Paul has to take responsibility for what he’s done, give recompense to your uncle.” Freddie turns blue eyes to the shabby little man shifting his weight from foot to foot, lips in a thin, bloodless line.

“Cut his cock off,” he spits, and Freddie laughs over the burst of protest from Starling and her paramour.

“I’m afraid we can’t do that. What about monetary compensation? Perhaps enough to cover her bride price and some over that to provide in the event there are any . . . lasting consequences?”

“*Lasting*—” he splutters, face paling, and falls silent in horrified consideration.

“That’s *impossible*,” Starling insists, turning her wide eyes to him, but he doesn’t look at her.

“I suppose there’s another option,” Freddie says after a beat. “Marriage.”

The shock-tinged glare Starling levels at her is pure venom, her jaw clenched tight.

“*Marriage*?” echoes her uncle.

“Yes,” she says, pitching her voice to make it sound like it was a wonderful idea that had just come to her. “It would restore your niece’s honor, legitimatize any child she might bear. And they certainly seem fond enough of each other.”

Starling’s hands close into fists at her sides.

Her uncle swallows convulsively and his eyes dart to Ser Paul, gaze hostile but considering. Freddie almost smiles because she knows what he’s thinking—about all the wealth House Krendler has that House Starling doesn’t. The man isn’t horrible looking, either, and he’s an up and coming knight. Really, altogether more than Starling deserves.

“Perhaps,” he finally says. “If Clarice *agrees* . . .”

Starling looks from him to Krendler and finally back to Freddie, who she gives a stiff nod.

“If my queen wishes it,” she says with a quiet fury, and this time, Freddie does allow herself to smile.

.

Brian is sulking when she finds him in his chambers, stripping off his outer cloak and throwing it onto a hook. He doesn’t acknowledge her.

“Don’t be angry over the little bird,” she says, twisting a red curl around her finger as she watches him stomp around.

“I’m not.”

“You’re not,” she repeats, just a touch mocking.

He grits his teeth, slams his hands down on the table between them. “Not *just* about her. I’m angry about *everything*, Freddie. Fucking everything. Has it ever occurred to you that you don’t *own* me? I’m not even your husband! What right do you have to dictate who can be in my life?”

“I’m the Queen,” she says before she can control her tongue. She’s the *Queen*, and after all she’s done to get to where she is, he thinks that he, that everyone, isn’t hers to do with as she pleases?

“But I’m also your lover,” she amends quickly, reaching out to grab his hand and rub her thumb over the top. “Yours, as you are mine.”

He snorts. “Mine and his.”

She could roll her eyes and vomit from how tired she is of this discussion. “Not forever. He’s already old enough to be my father and he’s drinking himself into an early grave. And . . .” She squeezes his hand, grins. “Then I’ll be Regent. I’ll do as I please.”

“If you have a son,” he mutters.

“Oh yes,” she says, grin getting wider. “If I have a son. Which brings me to the good news—I’m pregnant. We can be together again.”

Freddie learned a lot from the short reign of Margot Verger, and even more from what it took to undermine her. To be a queen, you had to want it enough to fight for it, not have it forced on you and *endure* it as though it was a burden; you couldn’t be under the thumb of your father, because puppets always get their strings cut sooner or later; and you certainly couldn’t have a brother like Mason. Freddie hadn’t even had to look very hard to find a string of victims left in his wake—men, women, children, really anyone who could be fucked and tormented. He was a twisted little monster and the court had been rapidly becoming aware of it.

Everything he was harmed Margot by association, and with a few words it was ridiculously easy for Freddie to start people talking about her as well, rumors morphing and spreading like a disease until they reached even the King.

Maybe that was why he took so much note of the color of that child's hair.

Freddie's child, male or female, will be brown of hair. She's made sure of that. Abel might be repulsive but she won't make the same mistake, won't risk a bastard.

Brian has been petulant and childish these last few months she's spent out of his bed, trying to conceive. Sniffing around the Starling girl had only been his latest outburst, but as irritating as she finds him, it's useful having a set of eyes and ears in the Kingsguard.

She pushes him to the bed and climbs on his lap while he digests her announcement, looking rather ambivalent about it.

"You're sure?" he finally asks.

"I went to see the Maesters this morning. I would've told you sooner but I had to tend court right after." She traces a few fingers down his chest. "What's so important that it's kept the Small Council in session all day?"

"I don't know. I was stationed outside the door."

Her lips thin a fraction, and she shoves him hard to his back. He opens his mouth again, but she presses her lips to his to shut him up.

.

When the doors to the Council Room do eventually open later that day and the Masters pour out, Freddie is waiting. They look tense as they pass, nodding their heads to her in deference.

When she steps in, the air is heavy, hot despite the cooling temperatures outside, and the *reek* hits her like a physical thing, her gorge rising instantly. Her hand flies automatically to cover her nose and she swallows, willing the bile back down.

The source of the odor is sitting in the middle of the long council table, maggots moving visibly beneath its skin. It was somebody's arm, once; now it's a rotting piece of meat with a glint of white bone visible at the end.

"What is that doing here?" she demands.

Abel picks it up at the severed end and jerks it so the fingers, long and feminine, wave at her. "It's all that remains of a certain Miriam Lass, one of Price's spies in Essos. Say hello, Miriam!"

Her lip curls beneath her hand. "Surely you didn't sit around all day just watching an arm decay?" Not that she would put it past him.

"No," he says, finally lowering the thing back to the table. His face sobers a little. "Nobody's sure where the rest of her is, or who did this. I don't think old Jack Crawford has it in him, and the strange thing is, I don't think they were even trying keep her from telling us what she knew. There was a letter, you see—her last missive to Price, clutched in her hand."

“And what did it say?”

“That there was truth to the rumors I’ve been hearing ever since I took the Throne. Rhaelyn Graham wasn’t barren. All those years of marriage without even a miscarriage and yet one last fuck at the end gets her pregnant. Imagine that.”

“Is she still alive?”

“She died in childbirth. The brat went to the Maester, Chilton, and he’s been crafty about hiding her all these years, more than I ever would’ve thought him capable of. Now there’s a thirteen year old girl across the sea who thinks she’s a queen, and Chilton and Crawford are planning to marry her to some chieftain of a tribe of savages forty thousand strong.”

Her fingers have gone slack, yet the smell of rotting flesh has faded a little because Freddie’s mind has turned inward. “A girl?” is all she can say. “It’s a girl?”

“A girl, Willow, who, if she’s intelligent, will be having a son in a timely manner.” He shoots her a critical glance. “Then her savages will have every motivation to invade. You know Lass claims they’re cannibals?”

Freddie shakes herself. Forces herself to lower her hand, to breathe in the rot. “She wouldn’t win. Who could?”

“Aegon the Conqueror once did.”

“The kingdoms weren’t united then. No matter how many savages she has, she can’t raise an army big enough to take on all seven at once. Even if she has a son, he’ll never be King. Ours will.”

He raises his head back to her from where he’d been staring at the arm, and she nods, forcing a pleasant smile. “I’m with child.”

He contemplates her silently, one of his fingers stained with rusty blood tracing around one of the semi-healed cuts the Throne gave to his arm. “I’ll believe it when I’m holding the child in my arms, perhaps,” he finally says, and turns to grab his goblet.

She turns, too, and starts for the door, some mix of a scowl and a smirk on her lips. His skepticism is annoying but at the same time it’s better he think she’s barren than realize she’s perfectly fertile but has been preventing conception on purpose these last years. After all, the younger her son is when Abel dies, the longer she’ll be Regent.

“We could have a son,” he says abruptly, stilling her. “The Graham girl and I, when she gets here. Unite our Houses. Put him on the Throne. Seems an elegant solution, don’t you think?”

Freddie grits her teeth and resumes walking, slamming the door behind her as she goes.

.

When Fredericka of the House of Lounds was very young, she had her fortune told.

She was a little older than she'd been during the trip to King's Landing and her mother was now dead in exchange for a brother she never asked for, and all that really consumed her anymore was the game and bettering herself in playing it.

The tourney in town didn't interest her in the way it did her siblings, who fawned over the knights and the showmanship and the ladies' finery, but she had very little choice but to participate in one way or another. Eventually she found herself walking the streets, meandering past booths that had been set up and through shops putting on sales in honor of the event.

And then she came upon the fortuneteller, an ancient, shrunken woman with yellow eyes.

Freddie hadn't been sure if she believed in her power or not, and it wasn't as though she needed confirmation of what she knew she would one day make happen. Yet, she asked her anyway.

"Will I be the Queen?"

.

Freddie steps out of the bath and drips water across the floor as she walks to her vanity. She sits, naked, and Beverly immediately begins tending to her hair, separating the long red strands into sections to braid.

"Did you hear what they were talking about in the Small Council today?"

"Yes," says Freddie, watching the motion of Beverly's fingers in the mirror. She's decent with hair, but her true value comes from her loyalty, and the fact that she's bedding Price, the Master of Whisperers. Whatever Freddie can't learn herself or through Brian, she can through Beverly.

"Jimmy says it was a message. The arm, I mean. Someone wants us all to know she's coming."

Freddie nods absently.

"Now he's in the library reading about the tribe—they're called the Dothraki. They *do* eat human meat, apparently, though there's not much else he's finding about them save accounts of them terrorizing the cities up and down the coast."

"What about the Graham girl?" she cuts in, still tracing that motion back and forth with her eyes. "Did the spy say anything else about her? What does she—what does she look like?"

Beverly's hands pause for an instant and she blinks. "She has brown hair, I think."

"Is she *beautiful*?" she presses, more urgently.

"Lass didn't say," Beverly says, thoroughly bemused now. "Though supposedly this Hannibal did agree to marry her after hearing just a description."

Freddie bites the inside of her cheek, nodding again, and sits there quietly for the rest of the time it takes the girl to finish her work. She continues chattering inanely but Freddie doesn't hear it, and even long after she's gone she still sits there, staring at herself in the mirror, words repeating over and over again in her head. She can still hear the voice that said them, faint and wispy like the remnant of a half-forgotten dream.

(*queen you shall be, until there comes another, younger and more beautiful, to cast you down and take all you hold dear)*

Chapter End Notes

Her mind, Freddie. He agreed to marry her after hearing a description of *her mind*.

Sooo . . . Margot and Freddie have jointly taken over Cersei's role, Rhaelyn is a composite of Rhaella and Elia, I'm the only person in the world who ships Beverly/Jimmy, and we finally got to see what's happening in King's Landing, otherwise known as the Wretched Hive of Scum and Villainy. Yay.

Today is my birthday, and I'm finally able to do some things legally that I wasn't before. My cake shall be Breaking Bad themed. And the move from hell mentioned in the last note is now over without any cops being called, injuries being inflicted, or people dying!

Anyone who leaves a kudos or comment will get an extra hour in the ball pit.

Chapter title comes from the song 'Seven Devils' by Florence and the Machine.

-Anna

PS: Oh, and I love Clarice. It's just that . . . Freddie doesn't.

# this is how an angel dies

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Frederick almost bursts a vein when he finds out their leaving will be delayed a day due to the incident. Will can see it throbbing near his temple.

"She's a *serving girl!*" he hisses, throwing his hands up and starting a steady stalking pace back and forth across the room.

"The Khaleesi was also . . . *traumatized* by what happened," says Alana, leaning minutely forward in her chair. "The Khal is simply concerned about the state of his wife before her first undertaking on the road—"

Frederick snorts. "Oh, I'm *sure* the Khal enjoys the comforts of civilized life just as much as Will does. This is nothing more than an excuse to *keep* enjoying them. The girl will probably take a convenient downturn tomorrow."

"*You* should enjoy *the comforts*, as you put it, for another day." Alana's lips were drawn. "The road to Vaes Dothrak is long and hard, with scarce water and no privacy. The desert in and of itself—"

"The desert," spits Frederick, with a disgusted wave of his hand. "Yes, let a hundred thousand of us traverse a Gods-be-damned *desert* so Will can be scrutinized by a few crones."

"The omens read by the Dosh Khaleen will determine how soon the Khalasar will agree to *invade*," says Alana, nearly gritting her teeth. She bites it back, turning it into a patient little smile. "Surely Lord Crawford told you well in advance that they're a very superstitious people?"

"I could care less about Dothraki omens," Frederick huffs, petulant as a child. "The Seven Kingdoms have grown weak and complacent in peacetime, more concerned with their own petty squabbles than invasion from outside—when could there be a *better* time to strike?"

"It cannot go any faster than this. As I believe I've told you before, Will—and, by extension, you—have the option of staying here while the Khalasar begin their . . . preparations."

Will can guess what that means from what she's already seen. The Dothraki obviously aren't a society that can function within itself—Hannibal has already said as much. Whether it's basic necessities or supplies for an army, they're going to be acquiring it through the only thing they seem to know—force.

"But sooner or later, the Khaleesi *must* go to Vaes Dothrak. There will be no crossing the sea before then."

“Or possibly after it, depending on what the widowed savages say after they kill an animal over her or look at her piss,” he bites out, crossing his arms.

Frederick has become very loose-tongued around Alana because he wants to bed her, and Will can, to a degree, understand. She’s very beautiful in a soft, warm way that lends itself to trustworthiness, makes you *want* to talk to her.

But that doesn’t mean that Will thinks it’s wise to actually do so. She may be Westerosi but it’s also the place that rejected the life she wanted for herself, rejected it while Hannibal provided it. Now there’s a deep fondness there, one that she severely doubts can be superseded by loyalty to a royal family she probably only vaguely remembers even sitting the Throne.

Will doesn’t say anything, though. Just sits there, hands folded on her lap while Winston tugs at the hemline of her dress. She manages a flicker of a smile as she looks at him.

“—important that they approve of her eventually becoming one of them,” Alana is saying. She’s about as frustrated as someone trying to break a brick wall with their own head, though her face is admirably blank.

“She will never be *one of them.* She’s not some peasant Dothraki girl with nothing to her name. She has seven kingdoms of her own to rule, whether she’s a widow or not.”

Alana sighs softly, turning her head from him. He doesn’t seem to notice. Instead, he zeroes in on Winston, lip curling.

“Can you not keep that thing *outside*?”

The puppy, legs splayed out and stomach flat against the marble floor, pauses with his mouth still around the spindle of Will’s chair, maybe sensing the words were directed at him. Then he goes back to chewing, heedless.

“Lady Crawford said I could keep him with me inside,” says Will, even as she bends to quickly snatch him away from the wood. He immediately switches his attention to her hands, and she winces.

“Maybe he should have a romp outside, anyway,” Alana says, already moving to stand. “Burn some energy.”

“But we—” Frederick begins, frowning deeply.

“And I have to do my rounds.”

“Your *rounds*?”

Alana’s back straightens, just a fraction. “Dispensing medicines and giving examinations. I’m —”

“Like a *Maester*?” he says incredulously. He can’t quite keep the smile off his face or the laughter out of his voice, not that Will thinks he’s trying.

She feels every word hit Alana like salt in a wound, a knife twisting hatred up her throat.

But she smiles at him with a crafted air of patience. “I will see you for lunch, my Lord.”

And how Frederick *does* like being called ‘Lord’. He *preens*, and the disgust doesn’t falter Alana’s expression.

Will can hear it, a whisper tickling the dark recesses of her ear—the voices of Alana’s mother and grandmother and her grandmother before her and hers before her, all saying the same thing. A woman’s best *weapon tool bargaining chip* is what’s between her legs, or the promise of it. Take that and tuck it in and never, ever forget it.

Alana waits for Will to scoop Winston up and make her way to the door, falling in a half-step behind her. She puts him down as soon as they get outside and then hesitates a fraction, eyes automatically seeking out the Dothraki camp. It seems to *loom* now, in a way it didn’t before.

“It’s alright,” says Alana. “No one blames you for anything. Certainly no one’s mourning for Garret.”

Of course they aren’t. The tribe ate well last night, and she can picture Hannibal sliding bits of tongue or heart or liver onto his tongue between sips of a nice red wine.

“You can go and visit Abigail, if you want . . .” she continues, peering at her from the corner of her eye.

She doesn’t really *want* to. But it’s not a matter of what she wants.

“Okay,” she says faintly.

Alana’s fingers brush the side of her arm, guiding her—*in Westeros, she could’ve had her executed for that; it’s what Abel Gideon would do*—and down they go to the cluster of tents. Will stares studiously at the ground, at her green silk shoes sinking down into the mud all the way up to the fine beads strung across their sides. People move in her peripheral vision, flashes of brown and tan that glide by, looking, staring, attention all on her.

Alana parts the flap of a tent and the first thing that hits Will is the smell, a faint iron tang of stale blood. It’s underlain with something pungently herby that shoots straight up her nose unpleasantly.

It suddenly seems inordinately hot, and Will can feel the sweat begin down in her scalp as she forces herself to look up.

Abigail is like a corpse, really. As pale as Will’s wedding dress, the bloodstained bandages startling against her neck. Green bits of crushed up leaves poke out the edges. She’s buried under rough horsehair blankets and Will can’t even make out the motion of her chest rising and falling. (*maybe it isn’t at all; you were too late and now she’s just a ghost on your back, clung around your neck—*)

Beside the bed, Marissa looks up from drizzling water out of a ladle into her slack mouth. Her head kind of—*twitches* in acknowledgement before she goes back to it.

Will feels the sweet warmth of a childhood spent running beneath the bright Essos sun, holding hands and stealing innocent kisses, but never without a shadow stretching over. It sucked away the heat and it wouldn't go away no matter how much hate Marissa sent at it. (*Everyone has always loved Abigail just a little too much.)*

Marissa says something, and even her high voice is dragged down by the harshness of the Dothraki language.

Alana replies, placating, then turns to Will. "No change is . . . *good* at this point. The best we can hope for."

Will thinks about all that blood, thick and wet and pouring between her fingers as she tried to push Abigail's skin and veins back together again. *No change*, she thinks, and imagines her split open that way forever, until all her insides have poured out her neck.

"I won't be long, Khaleesi," says Alana, gathering a few medicinal supplies from their places on the far end of the tent. She sweeps into a high curtsey on her way out, hair swaying forward to cover her eyes as she lowers her head.

In her absence, it's so quiet that Will can't hear her own thoughts. Garret's, on the other hand —they come through her head like starbursts in her vision. Abigail's hair knit into a blanket and her skin tanned to leather and her teeth threaded into a necklace, and oh, all that *meat*—

Cut away her horrible autonomy and swallow her whole and keep her inside forever.

Will's hand jerks up to her face and she scrapes it down as harshly as she can, pressing her fingers over her eyes until they threaten to burst. A bead of sweat finally breaks loose, running down her temple, and she just can't be here anymore. Alana said she wouldn't be long, the implication being that she should wait for her to get back, but since when is she her *minder*? She's not even one of her *ladies*.

Will turns on her heel, fingers grabbing and raising her skirt an inch to let her legs move faster.

"Khaleesi!" calls Marissa urgently.

She stills, hands tightening, crushing the fabric. The cool outside tickles her face, the tent flap just a few steps away. Slowly, she glances over her shoulder.

Marissa is standing, hands tense in front of her. "You—" she begins haltingly, the word thickly accented. "You—" She licks her bottom lip, eyes darting as she tries to form her sentence. "*Save* . . . she—*her*." She gestures down sharply. "I—*thank.* Much thank."

Will manages a small, genuine smile. "You're welcome."

"Garret horse-fucker," she adds with a scornful sneer.

Will snorts despite herself.

Marissa tilts her head consideringly before pointing to a rough-hewn mat beside Abigail's pallet. "Nevakh."

". . . Sit?" Will guesses. "You want me to sit?"

Marissa bends at the knees, mimicking the action and jabbing her finger at the mat.

"Sit," Will says again with more finality, slowly moving to do so.

"Sit," Marissa says, popping the t. "Nevakh."

"Nevakh," she repeats hesitantly, leery of her pronunciation.

Marissa says something long and rapid to her in Dothraki before waving her finger at something else, repeating one word with emphasis, and that's how they continue on, Abigail's harsh, dry breaths a counterpoint to the names of things traded back and forth in two languages. They're heavy, awkward things on her tongue that she knows she'll never like, but she lets them sink below the black surface of her mind, dispersed away to where they're needed.

She knows a little High Valyrian, because that's what her family was once—backwards, incestuous Valyrian farmers who became landowners who became nobles, until a dream moved them to Dragonstone and Aegon decided that nothing short of a continent was enough for him.

(Sometimes Will thinks long and hard about her ancestor Wilo, writhing and sweating in her maiden's bed as she dreamt of death and blood and doom, the end of one civilization and the rise of another. Sometimes she wonders if things would've been different if her mother hadn't had the nerve to name her after her.)

But just because she knows the rules for conjugating a verb doesn't make her fluent, the ability to pull a whole other set of words out of thin air far beyond her reach. She doesn't know that she'll ever be able to talk to these people Hannibal rules.

Alana smiles when she arrives back at the tent and sees what they're doing. Will has to look away from her, because the front of her tan horsehide dress is soaked through with blood and that makes the memory rush up clear and alive—the heaviness of the material stuck to her skin, the wet iron reek becoming a part of her, the brown-red caked into the quick of her nails that wouldn't come out no matter how she scratched at the soap.

Alana drops her tools into one bowl of standing water and rinses her hands in another. Pink blossoms to the surface very quickly in both of them, caking into red at the edges.

"I would've been sooner, but there was a birth. We hadn't realized it was twins."

Will knows there's generally only one way to deliver twins. It had happened to a woman once when they'd been guests in the house of one of the Merchant Kings, and she'd had nightmares about it for a while. A wailing infant in its father's arms as you sweat and struggle in agony for a second that won't come, midwives and healers and Frederick all

useless until the Stranger is at the foot of the bed and they finally feel free to cut you open and take it out.

Alana dries her hands and checks on Abigail, brushing brittle hair away to take her pulse. When she's finished, Marissa trickles a few more drops of water past her cracked lips.

Then Will sucks in a startled breath as they both grab her and start to *move* her, jockeying her up and onto her side, one of her arms left out and prone against the bedding.

"You can't leave someone laying in one position for too long," Alana explains. "It's bad for their skin."

"But isn't movement bad for the *wound*?"

"We have to be very sure to keep her neck stiff," she says, both of them carefully adjusting pillows and furs around the contours of Abigail's body. She looks, impossibly, even more like a corpse than before, stiff and unnatural.

Marissa wrings out a rag and begins to wipe down her limbs. Alana makes short work of crushing up a sweet-smelling mixture of oils, leaves, herbs, and what may be animal blood—at least Will dearly hopes it is—with a mortar and pestle. She sets the finished product down on the edge of the bed and turns to her.

"It's nearly midday," she says, with a tentative, soothing smile. "The Khal would like to eat with you."

Will glares at her. Wants to perhaps lurch forward and kiss her, because maybe if Alana wanted to fuck her the same way Marissa wants Abigail, she wouldn't take her back to Hannibal again and again. Or not. Frederick wants to fuck her, too, and it didn't make any difference.

She follows her to her fate like a beaten dog, tail tucked between her legs. They don't go to a proper dining room, but rather the kitchen itself, which is silent, motionless as a tomb, the absence of activity weighing heavier than the thing itself. The food's already on a small table in the corner when they arrive, Hannibal standing up in their presence. She sits in the chair he pulls out for her, *so very polite*, and she *does* feel it in that moment—so contradictory, knitted tightly into the fabric of his insanity—he places high value in social niceties. Discourtesy is ugly to him, yet torture and murder are *art*.

Alana has the *courtesy* to sound a bit concerned before Hannibal dismisses her and sits down. He puts food on her plate again, evidently uncaring she never touches it, has barely eaten at all in days.

She stares stonily at his chest. "What did you say to Garret to make him kill his family?"

Hannibal isn't startled, however much he pretends to be. "I barely ever spoke to him at all, much less recently. He wasn't one of my bloodriders—not even a warrior, just a hunter."

"You *hunt*?" she asks, skeptical.

“For practicality. A steady diet of human meat for so large a tribe is unsustainable.” He slips a forkful of meat into his mouth and pulls it out clean, the silver bright and polished.

(They say her father had silver hair. That when he was young, it was smooth and flowing like the silk of one of her dresses, glinting with a gold hue in the sun, and everyone thought that the Crown Prince was the most handsome man in all the Kingdoms. But then the madness ran its course through his brain, taking and taking and taking, and even though he actually wasn’t very old when he died, he had very little left. Hair like dull gray straw.)

“Alana tells me that Abigail has only just—what term is it the Westerosi use? *Flowered*. I feel that was what drove Garret to do what he did.”

“Why would that matter?”

“She’s an adult now. Surely she and Marissa would rather have their own tent than remain with their families.”

*And oh, how I’ve tried, I’ve* tried*, gentling away pale, doe eyed substitutes with lullabies and hands around their throat and their flesh in my mouth, but still the one thing that should be only mine is slipping like blood through my fingers to be lapped up with that thief-bitch’s tongue.*

“Why didn’t he just refuse to allow it? It would’ve been so simple and he wouldn’t have had to . . . Abigail wouldn’t . . .”

“Abigail can do as she pleases. Dothraki fathers don’t hold the power of life and death over their daughters.” Hannibal sips wine, stares at her over the rim of the fine crystal glass. A drop of it runs from the corner of his mouth down across his bottom lip, red as Garret’s blood, as Abigail’s open, gushing neck. “It’s only Westerosi Lords who keep them locked away like a prized horse, only ever to be brought out for the highest bidder.”

Will grinds her teeth, feels a muscle twitch in her jaw. “Yet you had no problem placing a very high bid.”

“You’re a fascinating woman, Will. Frederick and Uncle Jack presented me with a perfumed, powdered up piece of meat in the hopes that I would be intrigued by your body and that title you claim, and that’s quite *insulting*, isn’t it? To both of us.”

“Then why did you bother to go through with it?”

Hannibal finishes the last bit of food on his plate and licks his lips, the wine vanishing beneath a flash of his tongue. He pats his mouth daintily with a napkin.

“Your eyes,” he finally says.

“What about them?” she demands, immediately turning them down to fix on the table.

Rather than an answer, she hears him move, wooden chair legs scraping almost silently against the stone floor, the rustle of his clothes as he stands. His hand finds its way into her peripheral vision, extended in offering.

“There’s still another course,” he says, and she shudders.

“One I think you’ll enjoy,” he continues. She’d almost say his tone was placating. “How much have you actually eaten in the last three days?”

She decides not to say anything. It’s not a battle she can win, so she just stands up with her hands firmly at her sides, her eyes on the ground. She follows his feet to know where to go.

Finally he stops, and she raises her gaze just to the vicinity of his knees to see the flickering orange flames of an oven, burning merrily on a bed of logs.

A finger finds its way beneath her chin and tugs her head the rest of the way up, where she takes in Hannibal standing before a countertop with a spread of bowls and jars upon it.

“I do apologize if you don’t like sweets,” he says, turning to a bowl of flour. “I was forced to assume, given I’ve no one to ask about your tastes.”

She considers saying she hates them. “They’re fine.”

His hands work over the ingredients in the same way they handle a sword, with an effortless, perfect economy of motion. Oil, honey, eggs and spices, a dash of some clear, fragrant liquid, all added with prompt surety.

“Why did you send the cooks away? Shouldn’t they be doing this?”

Hannibal chuckles, low and melodic. “I enjoy doing it myself.”

“You enjoy . . . cooking?”

He divides the finished product onto an iron sheet and sets it over the fire, then turns to a bowl with melted chocolate sitting in the bottom, stirring in milk and sugar. “Food is life, Will. You put the food in your belly and you live. Should only servants study it? Or perhaps only women?”

“Women give life. You don’t.”

He glances over his shoulder at her. “And what is it that you see when you look at me, Will?” He tries to catch her gaze. “When our eyes meet?”

Will just stands there. Takes to staring at the little pastries as they rise with the heat, each perfectly formed. They smell as fresh and sweet as the linens of a maiden’s bed.

Hannibal removes them when they’ve risen far enough and puts one onto a plate of fine bone china, drizzling the chocolate with easy artistic flourish. (Will thinks that maybe, there are very few things in this world that don’t come to Hannibal *easily.*)

With the addition of strawberries to the top, he offers her the plate. She eyes it skeptically, disdainfully.

Finally, she plucks the pastry off and raises it to her mouth. At least she knows there's nothing suspect in it, and she can't remember when she last ate, and the *smell—*

"It's—" she says, her mouth full, her eyes wide. The thick, heavy texture rolls over her tongue and down her throat, and she's stuffed the rest into her mouth before she can think. It sticks to the back of her teeth, and she sucks at it for more flavor.

"Would you like another?" Hannibal asks with a smile.

Will blinks, her face going red. She straightens her spine and tries to wipe her hand discreetly on the back of her dress. "No. But . . . they are quite good. Thank you."

"Would you like to take some with you when we leave tomorrow?"

"No," she insists, trying to cloak herself in the frosty propriety of a queen.

Yet she will still find them tomorrow, all of them wrapped up neatly in little pieces of fine, dark blue paper, in one of Rhaelyn's saddlebags.

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The great Dothraki Sea is wide and barren, leeched of any color save the washed-out green of the grass, and the endless, terrifying, blue expanse of the sky, with its sun that *beats, beats, beats* down like an unmerciful god.

"The Dothraki believe that that's how the world will end," Alana tells her, sitting straight backed and immaculate on her roan mare. "That the grass will keep growing and spreading until one day, there's nothing left."

Will can imagine drowning in that. She's drowning in *this*, adrift on her little, well-bred white raft, with hot skin seeping enough sweat to soak down into her bones and lungs.

The pastries don't even taste good anymore. (Nothing does, except for the momentary, crisp relief of water on her tongue.) She ate too many of them once, for something else to do except stare at a horizon that never gets any closer, and then the heat boiled them in her stomach until she had to slide off her horse and bring them up amidst the tall, swaying blades of grass.

The first day, as the sunlight turns purple and red like a bruise in the sky, she asks when they're going to stop to sleep.

"Not for another day, at least," Alana says. "You'll have to sleep on your horse, your Grace. She knows to keep going."

So Will doesn't sleep. She shifts her aching thighs and straightens her knees against Rhaelyn's sides, cringing at the pop of the joints, and uses her scalded red fingers to try to

keep her hair from touching her scalded red face. She turns down the jerky Alana offers her, whatever it's made from, and breaks her remaining pastries into little crumbs that she throws to Winston. Soon it attracts more dogs, scraggly, thin things of all different types—a tall white one with pricked ears and patches of brown, one with long, tricolor fur, a small, scrappy, smooth haired one that protects its crumbs ferociously.

The watery, grey-red light of morning goes increasingly hazy. The sky seems further away. Then she's in a rolling black sea that roasts her from in the inside out, choking on blades of grass that slip down to strain the walls of her stomach.

"Khaleesi," comes a voice, high and young, slitting through the middle of the darkness and bleeding in light. Will opens her eyes.

"Khaleesi," Marissa repeats, staring at her intently. She has one hand on her shoulder, supporting her at the angle she's slipped to in the saddle, trying to push her back up.

Pain lances up her legs as she quickly rights herself, her hands threading around leather reins and Rhaelyn's mane. "Er, thank you, Marissa."

Marissa nods at her sharply, then spares a glance down at the dogs trotting at Rhaelyn's feet. They stare up at Will with eager wet eyes. There are three more now, one large and smooth, primarily brown with a white chest and front feet, and two small and beige, one curly-haired, the other with a strange, misshapen mouth that shows off its teeth.

Marissa says something in her language, waving her hand at them, then pauses, visibly frustrated as she gropes for the right words in the Common Tongue. "Get . . . gone . . . if bother."

"No!" Will exclaims, wide eyed. "They—I mean, they're—Khaleesi's." She points emphatically. "Khaleesi's dogs."

"Khaleesi's . . . dogs," Marissa repeats.

"Dogs." Will enunciates the word, pointing to each in turn.

"Dogs." Now Marissa points. "*Jano*."

"Jano," Will says carefully, rolling it across her tongue. She wants to remember it.

They continue like that, as they did at Abigail's bedside, Marissa pointing to something, both of them repeating foreign words over and over. Will says them until her tongue is dry and awkward, too big for her mouth and twisting the wrong way on the syllables.

Finally, Marissa raises her arm straight ahead, between the flicking palomino ears of her horse. "Vaes!"

Will looks up, squints hard against the afternoon sun. "Vaes," she breathes past her cracked lips. "City."

“City!” Marissa digs her heels into her horse and snaps the reins at just about the same instant Hannibal does. Rhaelyn follows their example without prompting, the dogs at her feet barking as they charge ahead, joyful as they throw themselves into their movement.

Will slouches down and clings to Rhaelyn’s neck and tightens her legs until she can’t stand it, each jerk of the horse’s back sending needles of pain up her hips. Sucking in a breath that smells like sweat and horse hair, she rolls her eyes upwards in their sockets and takes in the sight of the city as it grows larger on the horizon. It’s like a towering black sore shot out of the ground, an unnatural break in the flow of land and sky. A dark island in the sea. Not particularly large by the standards of the major Free Cities, but still walled, with spirals and towers peaking out above.

When she gets close enough, she hears the clang of bells from within, frantically rung. Men run across the top of the wall, and soon notched arrows are directed down at them from the battlements. Hannibal stares up at them impassively, his hands crossed at the base of Arnage’s mane.

Alana’s horse weaves its way through the crowd behind them to join Will in the shadow cast out from the city gate. She smiles down at the dogs that congregate around Rhaelyn.

“I see you’ve attracted quite the pack.”

“What are we doing?” Will demands, then glances at Hannibal. “What is he doing?”

“Waiting for tribute,” she sighs. “This city has struck a deal with the tribe to spare themselves from being sacked whenever they find themselves in its path.”

With a booming creak of metal, the gate opens just far enough to admit a small party of men, soldiers moving to step into the space as soon as they pass. At the forefront, flanked by a cadre of armored bodyguards and slaves, is a man dressed in grand white robes trimmed in pale blue, with a full head of brown hair and a well trimmed beard.

“Hail, Hannibal,” he says, “Khal of the Great Grass Sea.” He twitches his fingers at his side, and the men bring forward a succession of chests, some so huge they have to be carried by pairs. They open the lids to reveal glinting metal, iron and silver and gold, while others lead over fat sheep and goats by rope tethers and present baskets of fruits and vegetables and bread.

Hannibal tilts his head, silent for a moment, and finally motions to Alana.

She translates, as though he needs it: “Governor Sutcliffe. The Khal thanks you for what you have presented to him today. However, it is a most auspicious occasion for the tribe. The Khal has wed a sennight ago. Now you must also offer tribute to his Khaleesi.”

Will shrinks down in her saddle. Sutcliffe’s smile, already strained, becomes nothing more than a grinding of teeth. “Excuse me? That has never been—”

“As it is owed her.”

"*Owed*?!" Sutcliffe snaps, before visibly biting himself back. Will feels a worm, slipping and sliding up, up, up her hands and her brain, right to the top, bleeding with fear that one day soon, people are going to say it's weak and shove it back down into the dirt.

Hannibal smiles a small, almost-polite smile, cutting such a civilized figure with his clean-shaven face and well-tailored clothes.

"The Khal realizes that this is sudden," Alana says he says. "And so he will graciously give you time to decide on your . . . course of action."

Sutcliffe's narrow eyes dart past Hannibal, towards the mass of horses and bodies stretching on and on behind him, just as much of a sea as the one they're crossing. Then they alight on her, and it makes her feel like all her burnt, dead skin is peeling off at once.

"Until tomorrow at midday, Governor Sutcliffe." Alana inclines her head.

Sutcliffe hesitates before turning on his heel. The city gate slams shut solidly enough to shake the ground.

Hannibal makes a motion over his shoulder, and the offerings are swiftly collected, absorbed off into the crowd that quickly recloses around them. Then, with a word, they're making camp.

Marissa and Alana swing off their horses and stretch, the latter giving a fond pat to her mare's dusty neck. Marissa shoots a longing glance in the direction of the cart carrying Abigail, but forces her eyes to Will and extends her hand.

Will pulls her foot out of the stirrup and rocks to the side once, twice. It's completely ineffective, her leg a numb dead weight that sends cold, white pain up her thigh. Rhaelyn snorts and impatiently adjusts herself, her withers shifting.

Finally, Marissa grabs her hand and tugs, and Will pushes hard against the saddle. Alana grabs her leg once it reaches the top of Rhaelyn's back and gently guides it down to the ground, and Marissa wiggles her remaining foot out of the stirrup. It falls to the dirt with a thud, and Will's knees go out from under her all at once, like the joints have ceased to exist.

The two women grab her before she goes all the way down, heaving her back up and throwing her arms around their shoulders. Will tries to get her feet back under her, but her legs feel swollen all the way up to her hips, pins and needles in every muscle, hot one second, cold the next.

"Khal's—" comes a voice, only just loud enough to be heard. Then it says a word she doesn't know. "—*jano*," it finishes, and there's a chorus of muffled snickering.

Alana snaps something angrily, and Will looks up in time to see a tall, thin, dark-skinned man staring back at them with perfectly crafted, disconnected innocence. (His eyes are dead, deader than Garret's as his blood sunk down into the dirt.)

The little group around him disperses immediately, carefully avoiding looking in their direction, suddenly very interested in their tasks. That is, all except for one, fat and wide eyed, who puts his head down and wrings his hands but doesn't leave the other's side.

(Will suddenly feels dumb and devoted and anxious, *so* anxious.)

"What does that word mean?" she asks, her head swiveling back and forth between the two women at her sides. Her ankles are loose blades in the linchpin of her legs, jostling against tissue with each step she forces out of her feet. Her shoulders lock in their sockets, straining against her weight and creating an unbroken line of pain down her spine to her lower back as she braces herself upright.

"It's nothing," Alana says darkly. "Tobias has just been . . . getting *bolder*, lately."

"'Bolder'? *What did he say*?"

They limp her across the threshold of a tent. Just like that, the sun blinks out, like it was never a god at all. Just a candle flame.

"You need rest, Will," she says. It's the voice of a healer, a Maester, authoritative and assured, untouchable in its logic.

Marissa unrolls a bed of furs, and Alana lowers her to them. It hurts to stretch her legs flat.

Will repeats the word aloud, slurring it over her gummy tongue, and looks to Marissa, to see if maybe she, at least—

But no. The girl bustles over with a wet rag to wipe across her face, and it feels better than Will ever knew it could—to have all of the sweat and the dirt taken off of her in a long, cool slide.

Alana brings a cup to her lips and tilts it up, brushing her hair from her face. It's just water, the same as she drank on the road, but it tastes so much better to have it here, in a dark, still place. It washes the scum out of her mouth, lets her feel her tongue again.

"Just sleep, my Lady," says Alana, her fingers tracing up and down, up and down across her head—

—only suddenly they're Frederick's fingers, and his face, and the tent is darker and cooler. Her eyes aren't entirely open, and the world only seems half there, but the pain is real, the one, all-encompassing ache.

"Will," says Frederick. He stands up, and he seems very far away, for how close he's standing. "I thought I'd bring you this, before any more time passed." He dangles a pouch in front of him, lets it drop to the bed where he'd been sitting. "It makes Moon Tea. To prevent anything . . . distasteful."

A lot of things aren't very *tasty*, she thinks, somewhere up and apart from herself. She only hears his next words, because she doesn't see him anymore.

“You *must* convince those savages to make more frequent stops.”

Instead, she’s on the road. A long, dark road of long, dead grass that stretches out and out to all the ends of the earth. A sea that’s swallowed the world.

Her legs hurt, and her feet dangle, and her back can’t support her weight, and so she falls, falls, falls, slumped like a corpse on the back of her mount.

Her hands thread over a coat as smooth as black glass and rip at feathers where she gathers them in her fists, but still it carries her on.

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Hannibal doesn’t break his fast with her, surprisingly. Instead, Marissa pokes her head into the tent a scant half hour after Will wakes up and waves to her excitedly, beckoning her to follow.

Will can feel her legs now, every inch of them, all of it excruciatingly *present* with each step she takes. Marissa offers her an arm, but Will thinks of that word she still doesn’t know, sinking like a rock beneath the surface of her mind, and refuses it.

She hobbles along after her in what turns out to be a mercifully short trip, just into the next tent over. Most of the camp is still fairly quiet, slow to begin its usual bustle so early, but this tent—*Hannibal’s tent,* she realizes—is full of people and raised voices.

Hannibal sits in the center, immaculate. Alana is at his side, listening intently. At his other side, Frederick scowls.

“We’re not working any angle,” says the man in front of them, sighing. He tilts his head, dark blond hair fluttering.

“As if we are supposed to believe *that*,” Frederick laughs. “House Verger has *well* shown just where its loyalties lie. *With itself*.”

“All my father’s doing, I assure you.” His voice is like pus, slowly oozing out of a wound. “It’s not as though Margot *wanted* to marry some fat old man twice her age. Did you, Margot?”

The woman next to him swallows hard and shakes her head.

“And just look where it got us! He murdered her child, *their* child. Trueborn, whatever lunacy convinced him otherwise! He’s crazier than Aeryn Graham ever was, even on a bad day!”

Hannibal’s eyes drift past the Vergers to land on her. He motions her over.

“Your Grace,” says Alana. “This is Mason and Margot, of the House of Verger. I believe we discussed them, during our . . . lesson . . .?”

Will nods stiffly.

“Your Grace,” Mason gushes, dropping into a bow.

His eyes on her make her feel like she’s rolling in mud. Like she’s a *pig*.

“Your Grace will recall that it was unknown what happened to the Lady Margot and her brother. It seems we have found them, in this city.”

“We have nothing left,” Margot says quietly, eyes on the floor. “No money, no home, just—”

Just each other. *And we were born together, sister dear, we shared a womb, so what does it matter if I—*

Will sways on her feet. Rips with bony fingers in her mind to try to tear out the thoughts by their slimy, filthy roots.

“The Khal would like to know what the Khaleesi thinks on the matter,” Alana translates. “Since it is not a matter concerning his own people.”

Margot finally looks up at her, eyes big and haunted. Like Abigail’s. (So alone.)

“Well *obviously*—” Frederick begins.

“There are no queens here, Margot,” Will says. “Just a Khaleesi.”

Margot nods slowly, cautiously.

“Fine, then. I need a handmaiden who speaks the Common Tongue. While Abigail is . . . indisposed.”

Will brushes past them, hardly listening as Alana needlessly repeats her words in Dothraki. She welcomes the sunlight now, and the pain in her legs, and anything that reminds her that she’s apart from that . . . *thing*.

“What the fuck was that?” Frederick demands, nearly the instant she steps into her tent, him hot on her heels.

“As I said, I need a—”

The open palm of his hand hits her face. Save the initial sting, it doesn’t hurt much in comparison to the rest of her.

“You did that just to go against me because you are a stupid, selfish little girl. Don’t try to tell me you didn’t. And now, *now* we have a former coronated queen in our midst, just waiting for any opportunity to fuck us over! If you think *anyone* from House Verger is as poorly

versed in playing the Game as you, you don't know anything. It's as though you don't even care about your throne at all."

Oh yes. As if he cares about *her* throne so very much. It's all for her, you see.

"You—" He bares his teeth and clenches at his hair. "You just made things a thousand times harder for yourself. With whatever *modicum* of intelligence you posses, watch yourself around the Verger whore. Watch yourself however much she tries to ingratiate herself with you, which she *will*."

"It's Mason that needs to be watched," she mutters.

"Of course he does! Margot managed to lose the throne and take the whole family down with one adulterous fuck! Now the only way they can claw back up is through *you*, and it's not as though *Margot* can marry you!"

His hand curls in her hair, tugging just enough to be felt. Their noses almost touch.

"If I get any hint, any *breath*, of you—"

She cuts him off, not in the mood to hear whatever threats and vulgarities are on his tongue. "You can rest easy, Frederick. I would rather die."

And she would—rather die than marry Mason.

She'd rather die than marry Frederick, too.

.

Before the sun reaches its midday height, she has Marissa fetch her some scraps of meat and feeds her little pack, letting them all into her tent to get them out of the heat. She lets them lick her hands and her face and cuddle up next to her on her bed of furs. A couple of them are shy at first, lingering back around the entrance, only darting forward to snap up the food, so she makes a point of not looking at them, because she's heard that dogs find that intimidating. (She understands.)

Instead, she rubs Winston's belly and runs her fingers through the fur of the bolder ones pushed up against her legs. When the scraps are all gone, she puts down a dish of water, and that finally convinces the stragglers to come further in, all of them lapping it up enthusiastically.

She wishes she could just sit here with them forever. She could be so happy that way, just watching them.

But she has . . . obligations.

The way to Abigail's sickbed is too short. (But maybe not short enough. She thinks she hears that word again, that same phrase, if not in voices then in *eyes*, each time they pass over her.)

Abigail doesn't look like she's moved at all, this whole time. She's lost weight. Her face looks like a skull, covered in a thin white sheet.

At least the blood isn't seeping into the bandages around her neck anymore.

"He's a monster," she says, a catch in her breath.

"Who?"

She starts, but she can't find it in her to turn around. She doesn't know how she hadn't noticed that they weren't alone, but she recognizes the voice, that cool, careful distance.

Will thinks about her own words. About *monsters*.

Garret. Mason Verger. Frederick.

Hannibal.

"All of them," she whispers.

An elegant hand hovers over her shoulder, close enough to feel body heat, but withdrawing before touching.

"There's a beast in every man, Khaleesi," Bedelia says. "Every woman, too."

Will looks at Abigail's lips, their vulnerable, untouched peach-pink. Remembers when there was a man's blood on them.

"It stirs whenever you put a blade in their hand. That will never change, and it's useless to fight against. The only thing you can do is use it."

Will reaches out, slowly, gently, and runs the pad of one finger over the top of Abigail's stiff hand. She's cold. But at least she's not burning alive from the inside out, boiling her own brain away to try to scorch out an infection.

"What does . . ." Will repeats the word as best she can, her mouth wanting to trip over the foreign combination of syllables. ". . . mean?"

There's a pause, and Bedelia sounds bemused when she answers. "It's a verb. *Kicked*."

And Will nearly laughs, nearly can't keep it all locked down in the top of her chest. *The Khal's kicked dog*. Because it's what she is, isn't she?

At midday, Governor Sutcliffe and his men come out and give her tribute. Slaves in gold collars present her with wines and silks, jewels that glint with multifaceted splendor in the sun, jars of sugar and honey, and even two fine dogs, with long, graceful legs and black and tan coats brushed to a sheen.

“You’ve . . . chosen your gifts well,” she tells Sutcliffe. He has, more than he knows.

Dogs for a dog. A payment owed to her not as a Khaleesi, but a well-heeled, kicked *bitch*.

.

They don’t leave that day. Instead, there’s a minor celebration in the evening, an acknowledgement of a tribute well gained. The Khal is strong, and the tribe is strengthened, and now the city and its people can listen to them exult it beneath an ink black sky.

Will sits in her tent and feeds her dogs, late into the night. They gather around her on the furs, even the ones that were shy, and their body heat creates a pleasantly warm cocoon, soft and gentle, rhythmic with their breathing. She could float away in it.

She picks up Frederick’s little pouch of leaves for the Moon Tea by its tie and lets it twirl back and forth, back and forth an arm’s length away. Then she flings it away from her.

She pets each dog in turn, pressing a kiss to each of their heads. Then she stands and lets her hair out of its braids, pulls off her dress, rich purple silk pooling around her feet on the ground. (Purple, the royal color. Not meant for her.)

The shift beneath is white and plain, and lets in the vicious chill of the night. The Dothraki Sea is just like a desert, arid heat throughout the day, barren coldness after sunset.

*You’ve a woman’s body, Will*, Frederick had told her not so long ago.

So she does.

She steps out of her tent all at once, without looking first. In fact, she doesn’t look at anything, her gaze single-mindedly ahead.

She feels eyes on her, bringing with them the weight of a type of cruel, disdainful *amusement*. Then there’s Mason Verger’s, alight with uninhibited lust that consumes and consumes everything in its path, like a black void, like death itself.

She does look over once, right before she steps into Hannibal’s tent. Frederick is angry, and hurt, and so, so *jealous*. She almost smiles at him.

Hannibal moves to stand up when she enters, but she pushes him back with a hand on his chest. He likes her eyes, he said, so she gives them to him, staring into that dried blood gaze as she cups his jaw, runs a thumb across his cheekbone.

She drops her shift and he’s already hard and straining for her as she crawls atop him. They’ve only done this once before, but this time she relaxes as she guides him into her, lets herself focus on the slide of flesh on flesh as she sinks down. He’s inside her, touching the

mouth of her womb, the sum of her House, where all its kings must issue forth, and he's warm and alive and his hands are on her hips and his eyes, his eyes—

*I am a wailing child at my mother's breast, and I am gentled and contented by sweet kindnesses, by another hand in mine. But then it is all ripped away, torn like a limb from its socket, and I must breathe—live—exist knowing that I only do so because—*

*Because I* ate *it.*

Chapter End Notes

What's it been, like THREE YEARS? I own animals that weren't even BORN the last time I updated this thing. I don't really know what to tell you as far as excuses go . . . college? I got really pissed at GoT during season 5? Other fandoms?

All of the Dothraki words come from an online Dothraki dictionary, which is a thing that exists.

I don't know how this got so long. It just wouldn't stop.

Oh, and the 'Wilo' Will mentions is this universe's answer to Daenys the Dreamer, Daenerys's ancestor who predicted the Doom of Valyria.

The chapter title comes from the song "Sail" by AWOLNATION.

Thank you all so much for the kudos and comments! I really, truly appreciate all of them.

-Anna

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!